Justification

Described

Justification is a legal and governmental act by God in which He:

- decrees that our Adamic original, known and unknown personal sins are pardoned and forgiven.
- declares us perfectly right or righteous in His sight because of Jesus Christ.

As King of kings and Final Judge, God pronounces the above verdict over humans who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in advance of His Final Judgement of every human. At the Final Judgement, He declares the same verdict before all those gathered.

Explained

Justification involves God as the Supreme Ruler and Judge declaring our standing before Him has changed from that of “guilty” and “condemned to eternal punishment” to that of “not guilty” and “perfectly righteous in Christ”. Justification involves God the Judge and Ruler pronouncing that real believers have a perfect status before Him because Jesus Christ has through His death paid the penalty owing because of our sins.

Relevant Greek words

In the original Greek, the word “justification” is “dikaiosis” which means “justification, … acquittal” ¹ or “the act of declaring righteous… acquitted”. ²

In the original Greek, the word “justify” is “dikaioo” which mostly means “treat as just… be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous…” ³ “Dikaioo” ⁴ also means “to show to be right or righteous”. ⁵ But this latter meaning is limited to a few verses such as Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:35 and possibly Luke 10:29, 16:15 and Romans 3:4. This latter meaning will be discussed later in the section “James 2:14-26” in Chapter “Justified by grace through faith and evidenced by…”

Luke 7:29 illustrates the main usage in the New Testament of the word “dikaioo” or “justify”: “And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having

---

¹ Bauer, page 198.
² Vine, page 338.
³ Bauer, page 197.
⁴ Colin Brown says that in the ancient Greek-speaking world from the time of Pindar and Aeschylus – the 500’s and 400’s B.C., two of the three meanings of “dikaioo” was “to put right” (e.g. the law on violence, Fragment, 169, 3)” and “to give someone his due, either in the sense of ‘to punish’ (Herodotus 1, 100) or from the time of the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament onwards ‘to declare righteous, to justify’” (page 354).
⁵ Vine, page 339.
been baptized with the baptism of John.” Here we see tax collectors and people declared God to be righteous. It would be wrong to say “justified” here means to make God righteous. This is because God is already perfectly righteous by nature (see Psalm 11:7). He does not need humans to make Him righteous.  

Justification refers to our status before the Supreme Ruler and Judge

Justification is a legal or forensic term. The words “legal” and “forensic” refer to a court of law situation before a judge. “Legal” here does not mean legalistic. Justification also is a term which relates to our decreed status before God in relation to His absolute rule or government of all angelic beings and humans. It can also be called “being declared right”, “being declared righteous”, “being declared just”, “being judged just”, “being judged righteous”, “God-declared justification”, “God-pronounced justification”, “God-decreed justification”, “credited righteousness”, “imputed righteousness”, “accounted righteousness” or “God-declared righteousness”.

Justification relates to what God declares or pronounces in a combined governmental-legal sense is His verdict as the Supreme Ruler and Judge upon a person.

The nature of justification is seen in Romans 8:33-34 when Paul contrasts justification with a legal pronouncement of condemnation on a person: “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? …” These verses speak of the charges of which we are accused as sinners and rebels against God’s supreme rule. To condemn someone involves declaring them guilty. To justify someone is to declare them “not guilty” or “innocent” of the charges against them. So these verses are obviously showing justification relates to our decreed status or standing before God the Supreme Ruler and Judge.

Observe Romans 5:16 speaks of condemnation being a judgement of God contrasted with justification: “...For the judgement which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification.” This is another verse which implies justification is a combined governmental-legal verdict of God. It is not only God who condemns unrepentant sinners. God-given conscience (see Romans 2:15) and the Law of Moses (see Romans 7:7-11 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10) do the same.

God is the Supreme Ruler and Judge combined

God is not just a judge. He is the Supreme Ruler and Perfect Judge combined. In this sense, God is like those types of emperors or kings who combined the functions of highest ruler and supreme judge together.

The Hebrew word “shapat” refers to God’s role as the combined Supreme Ruler and Judge. “Shapat” means “to judge, govern”. 7 “Shapat” is sometimes wrongly taken to refer only to God being a Judge and not also an Absolute Ruler.

---

6 Refer to the section “A new Romanized ‘Protestant’ view” in Chapter “Common errors about justification” for more details on verses which show the Greek word “dikaioo” meaning “justified” does not refer in the New Testament to being made righteous by regeneration. Refer to Chapter “Righteousness through Jesus” for teaching on God making believers righteous in a broader sense than a change in legal standing before Him. In the Greek New Testament, the word “dikaiosune” is sometimes used to refer to this broader concept.

7 Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 947.
Harris, Archer and Waltke say “the primary sense of ‘shapat’ is to exercise the processes of government. Since, however, the ancients did not always divide the functions of government, as most modern governments do, between legislative, executive and judicial functions (and departments) the common translation, ‘to judge’ misleads us.” 8 “Legislative” refers to the gathering together of elected members of parliament with the purpose of making laws. “Executive” refers to a president or a prime minister and his cabinet or similar highest elected leaders. “Judicial” relates to judges and courts of law. In various contexts in the Hebrew Old Testament, “shapat” is used in relation to God to refer to Him:

- being the Supreme Ruler.
- being the Supreme Judge.
- enforcing and putting into practice His laws, commands and decisions as the combined Absolute Judge and Ruler. This can also involve punishing those who disobey His commands and decisions (see Isaiah 66:16) or vindicating or declaring righteous and delivering people (see Psalm 26:1 and 43:1). Isaiah 33:22 combines a number of God’s attributes: “(For the Lord is our Judge, The Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King; He will save us).”

Brown, Driver and Briggs say that as an attribute of God “shapat” means to “judge, govern; act as law-giver, judge or governor; decide controversy; execute judgement: vindicating, condemning and punishing”. 9 “Shapat” is used in verses such as Genesis 16:5, 18:25, Judges 11:27, 1 Samuel 3:13 and Psalm 96:13.

In Matthew 19:28 and 25:31-46, Jesus Christ shows that He is the combined Supreme Ruler and Judge. Matthew 19:28 says: “…the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Christ says He will be on a throne. His throne indicates He is the Supreme Ruler. This verse connects sitting on a throne to judging others. Revelation 11:15-18 reveals God’s reign as King is connected to His judging of others.

**God is more than a Judge**

We do not worship a number of different Gods – God the Judge, God the Absolute Ruler, God the loving Creator, God the gracious merciful Father and so on. We worship One God Who is all the above things. Therefore when God the Judge justifies believers, He in various senses exercises other aspects of His character. For example, justification is an expression of God’s loving, gracious and merciful heart as Creator. Also it is only because God is the Supreme Ruler that He has the absolute authority and power to choose to justify believers regardless of opposition by any human or Satanic authority.

As believers, our relationship with God has many features. Here are many of these:

- He is our Creator. We are His created.

---

8 Ibid, page 947.
9 Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 1047.
• He is our loving Father and we are His loved children by nature and adoption. Also as His children, we love Him.
• He is our Lord and we are His submissive people.
• He is our Master and we are His loved slaves.
• As a covenant-making God, He has decreed the New Covenant. We have received it and submitted to it.
• He is our Supreme Ruler and Judge Who has pardoned and forgiven all our offences against Him and His laws and has declared we are righteous before Him through Christ.
• He is perfectly righteous and we are righteous in Him through His Son.
• He is perfectly holy and has sanctified us at conversion and is outworking this in our lives at present.
• We are in union with Him through His Holy Spirit.
• He is almost unbelievably merciful, kind and longsuffering and we have experienced this.
• He has and is continuing to express His awesome grace towards us even though we do not deserve it.
• He is continually transforming and renewing our nature, characters and lifestyles.

We can also see our relationship to Him in terms of a vine and branches, a temple, stones which are part of a bigger rock and many other comparisons.

Great errors and problems occur when believers wish to see their relationship to God in only one or a few of the above descriptions. For example, at present some believers wish to limit their perception of their relationship to Him only in terms of Him being their loving gracious merciful Father, Creator and Covenant-keeper, Who is in spiritual union with them by His Spirit. They dislike an emphasis on Him being our Lord, Master, Supreme Ruler and Judge. ¹⁰

**Justified” in a clearly court-of-law context**

1 Corinthians 4:3-5 shows Paul understood the Greek word “dikaioo” meaning “justify” primarily in court-of-law terms: “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God.”

In Greek, the above expression “I am justified” is a form of the word “dikaioo”. Forms of “dikaioo” are also used in Acts 13:39, Romans 3:24, 3:28, 3:30, 5:1, 5:9, 8:30, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Galatians 2:16, 2:17, 3:8, 3:24 and Titus 3:7 in relation to believers being justified by God’s grace through Christ.

Note in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 when Paul says, “For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this, but He who judges me is the Lord”, He is saying:

¹⁰ Refer to Chapter “A Different Gospel-East Believism”, Chapter “God the Supreme Ruler” and Chapter “God the Perfect Judge” for teaching on these very important latter aspects of God’s character.
• His conscience at that point did not make him aware of any sin in his life of which he had not repented.
• Even if he could not observe any sin in himself, this did not mean he would be declared righteous or justified.
• He was not declared righteous by God on the basis of his Holy Spirit-empowered good works or obedience in relation to His call as an apostle. Note 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 refers to Paul’s stewardship in ministering God’s mysteries to others.
• Because the Lord is Paul’s Judge, only He can declare Paul righteous or justified.

In Greek, the expression “I am justified” is in the perfect tense and passive voice. The perfect tense refers to a completed action with continuing effects or a state of already being justified. The passive voice means another person did the action of justifying Paul. This other person was God. By implication, Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 4:4, that instead of being justified by God as a completed action through good works, he has been justified by another means. This other means is revealed in Paul’s other words in verses like Acts 13:39, Romans 3:24, 3:28 and 5:1 – by God's grace through faith.11

The context of 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 shows Paul sees justification by God in court-of-law terms. This is clear from the following:

• Paul uses forms of the Greek word “anakrino” in verse 3 (twice) and verse 4. “Anakrino” is translated as “judged”, “judge” and “judges” in these two verses. In the context of these two verses, “anakrino” means “to conduct a judicial enquiry” 12 or “question, examine – of judicial hearings”.13
A form of “anakrino” is used in and translated as “examined” in Luke 23:14 when Pilate – the supreme governor and judge of Palestine – judged Jesus Christ as being innocent of the accusations against Him. Forms of “anakrino” are also used in relation to Herod the King (see Acts 12:9) and the Roman Governors Felix and Festus (see Acts 24:8 and 28:18) holding judicial enquiries into the guilt or innocence of others.

• In 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul uses the word “judge” which in Greek is a form of the word “krino”. One of the main usages of the word “krino” in the New Testament is “as a legal technical term: judge, decide, hale before a court, condemn, also hand over for judicial punishment” 14 or “to decide a question of legal right or wrong, and thus determine the innocence or guilt of the accused and assign appropriate punishment or retribution”.15
Forms of “krino” are used in relation to Paul being judged before the tribunal of Caesar – the supreme human ruler and judge (see Acts 25:9, 25:10, 25:20 and 26:6). “Krino” or forms of it are used very frequently in the New Testament in relation to God and Jesus

11 Note the perfect tense and passive voice form of “dikaioo” is also used in Romans 6:7 in relation to the fact God has declared he who has died with Christ to be justified from their sin. Being justified from sin means to be forgiven or freed from the guilt of sin. There is only one difference in Greek between the expression “I am justified” in 1 Corinthians 4:4 and the expression “has been justified” (Marshall’s “The Interlinear NASB-NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English”) or “has been freed” (N.K.J.V.) in Romans 6:7. The difference is 1 Corinthians 4:4 expression is in the first person “I” and the Romans 6:7 is in the third person “he”.
12 Louw and Nida, page 953.
13 Bauer, page 56.
15 Louw and Nida, page 555.
Christ the Supreme Ruler and Judge judging people. Examples are John 5:30, 8:50, Acts 17:31, Romans 2:16, 2 Timothy 4:1, 1 Peter 1:17, 4:5 and Revelation 20:13.

- The expression “judged…by a human court” in verse 3 also confirms Paul is here referring to judgements in a court-room sense. In Greek, the word “court” is a form of the word “hemera”. Bauer says that in the context of this verse, “hemera” refers to “the day of judgement – fixed by a judge”. 16 In Greek the expression “human court” is “anthropines hemeras” which Bauer says means “a day appointed by a human court”. 17 The word “hemera” or forms of it are used in verses like Romans 2:16, 2 Peter 2:9, 1 John 4:17 and Jude 6 in relation to God’s Final Judgement Day.

- 1 Corinthians 4:5 refers to Jesus Christ’s judgement after His Second Coming. Matthew 12:36-37 and Galatians 2:16 (3rd usage) refer to being declared justified by God at the future Final Judgement.

The context has nothing to do with being born-again or made righteous through regeneration. The context refers to being justified in relation to the judgements or declarations of God the Supreme Ruler and Judge.

**Justification and God’s covenant**

Justification should not be seen only in relation to God’s role as the Final Judge. Through His New Covenant, God justifies believers in Christ. So justification must also be described in covenantal terms. God is perfectly faithful to His covenants. Under the New Covenant, He has promised by His undeserved grace and mercy to justify or declare righteous believers (see Romans 3:21-26).

One view suggests that justification should only be seen in covenantal terms and not in relation to God’s role as the Perfect Judge. But this can be seen to be wrong when we look at the way the Greek words for believers being justified by grace are often used in court-of-law contexts.

Also, note the usages of “dikaioo” in Luke 7:29, Romans 3:4 and 1 Timothy 3:16 relate to declared judgements or being shown to be righteous and not to being placed into a covenantal relationship.

Luke 7:29 says “the tax collectors justified God”. This means they declared God to be righteous. The tax collectors were Jews who were already in covenantal relationship to God through the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants.

Romans 3:4: “That You may be justified in Your words and may overcome when You are judged.” This verse refers to God being declared or shown to be righteous. 1 Timothy 3:16 refers to God in Christ being “justified in the Spirit” or declared or shown to be righteous by or in the Spirit.

---

16 Bauer, page 346.
17 Ibid.
Imputing or accounting as righteous in the New Testament

Romans 4:3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23 use forms of the word “logizomai” in the original Greek in relation to justification. This demonstrates justification is a legal verdict of God in His operations as the Supreme Ruler and Judge. “Logizomai” means in the context of justification “to reckon… credit something to someone” or “to reckon, take into account or metaphorically to put down to a person’s account”.

Richards says, “Again and again Romans 4 speaks of faith being ‘credited’ to someone as righteousness. The Greek here is ‘logizomai’, ‘to reckon’. The word was an accountants’ term in New Testament times, a word in common usage. It means ‘to make an entry in the account book’.”

The usages of this word in relation to justification show justification relates to a legal reckoning by God to believers of the forgiveness of all their sins and of their being credited by God as being perfectly righteous in Christ. It is as though God wrote in an account book with your name on it “All debts cancelled or blotted out” and “Perfectly righteous in Christ”. This account book is valid for you at the Final Judgement by God.

Some opponents of the Evangelical view of forensic justification by God’s grace argue that this view uses the Greek word “logizomai” to mean “accounted or reckoned as true but not so in reality”. These opponents argue this way because they regard God’s judgement of the legal standing of people before Him as unreal or less real than His judgements of the state of their nature or character or their behaviour.

“Logizomai” does sometimes refer to things which are not true. For example, a form of this word is used in Luke 22:37 about Jews numbering or regarding Jesus Christ to be a sinner. Jesus was not really a sinner. But it is true unbelieving Jews judged Him to be a sinner.

But mostly, “logizomai” refers to things which are true. This Greek word can relate to two types of truth. The first is truths which we think about the real nature, character or actions of people (see 1 Peter 5:12). The second is truths God decrees about the legal standing of people before Him as the King of kings and Judge. These judgements by God are not lies or untruths. Whatever God decrees is truth.

2 Corinthians 5:19 states: “…God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them…” Here God says He does not account believers’ sins to them because of Christ. This does not mean God was lying here about believers’ sins. He was not pretending their sins did not exist. Instead as an absolute truth, God the Supreme Ruler and Judge decided not to account believers’ sins to themselves. He accounted their sins to Christ.

The realities of Isaiah 53:5 and 53:12 about God punishing Jesus because of our sins are not pretences. God the Sovereign Ruler and Judge accounted or debited our sins to Christ and punished Him accordingly in reality.

What God decrees as the Supreme Ruler and Judge is not pretence or unreal or untrue. Whatever He declares or pronounces is absolutely real.

---

18 Bauer, page 476.
19 Vine, page 322.
20 Richards, page 203.
Legal fiction?

Liberal, Roman Catholic and some other theologians call the Evangelical-Pentecostal teaching on justification presented in this chapter by the critical expression “legal fiction”. By using this expression, they suggest Evangelicals and Pentecostals teach that believers are righteous only in some type of fancified, courtroom decree sense without any accompanying changes in their nature and practical living.

But this critical name “legal fiction” does not perfectly describe forensic justification by God’s grace. This is because the justification by grace of New Covenant believers is always accompanied by them being given an imparted righteousness in Christ through regeneration (see Ephesians 4:24) and through receiving the Holy Spirit, and begins always to express itself in Holy Spirit-empowered good works. Also in Old Testament times, believers who received justification by God’s grace were also empowered by Him to live right lives. So all who are justified by His grace in a forensic or courtroom sense are also empowered in righteousness in other real ways.

In addition, as stated earlier, God’s justification of believers involves His decrees not just as Judge but as combined Supreme Ruler and Judge. It is ridiculous to say that it is only a legal fiction when God the Supreme Ruler gives sinners a complete pardon and a right status before Himself. This is similar to in ancient times when Emperors or other absolute rulers decreed pardons and right legal statuses for some of their subjects. These pardons and legal standings were not fantasies in the imaginations of those pardoned.

Prospective converts can be caught in the imaginary world of legal fiction. This can occur if they try to receive justification by grace without being willing to receive Jesus Christ as both Lord and Saviour by faith and through an accompanying repentance in relation to sin, unbelief, known sins, Christ and God. But no real convert lives in a delusion of legal fiction.

God’s judgements are faultless and better than human justice

2 Timothy 4:8 speaks of the Lord as “the righteous Judge.” Psalm 9:7-8 declares: “But the Lord shall endure forever; He has prepared His throne for judgement. He shall judge the world in righteousness, and He shall administer judgement for the peoples in uprightness.”

Deuteronomy 25:1 reveals God loves to see the innocent being acquitted and the guilty condemned in human courts: “If there is a dispute between men, and they come to court, that the judges may judge them, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked.” Refer also to Proverbs 17:15. Human courts operate at a far lower standard of justice than how God the Perfect Ruler and Judge runs His Heavenly Throne and Courtroom.

The problem for God is if He operated His Heavenly Throne and Courtroom by the perfectly just standards of acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty, He would have to condemn all humans as guilty. But as a perfectly loving Creator, He does not wish to pronounce a final judgement of condemnation on any human. John 3:17 says: “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

But God would have to become a hypocrite or a sinner Himself – something which is impossible – for Him to accept humans who have committed any sin into His perfectly holy sinless Presence and to not punish them. God hates all sin because He knows its destructive effects on all involved. He has made divine laws against all sin and pronounced the sentence of
death on anyone who sins. So for Him to act purely in love and mercy without punishing sin would be hypocrisy.

God knew the only way He could show love and undeserved mercy to sinful rebellious humans was if He could find a human who was without sin who would be willing to die as a substitute for other humans taking the punishment they deserved because of their sin. But there was not one totally innocent human. Also, angels are a different species and therefore could not act as substitutes for humans.

God the Son Himself chose to be born in human nature through a woman called Mary. He lived a life of perfect love for, faith in and obedience to God the Father despite the temptations of Satan and the sinful world upon Him. As the Supreme Ruler and Judge, God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – debited every sin of every human to the account of the Lord Jesus Christ Who was God the Son in human flesh.

Jesus Christ willingly acted in place of every human by accepting the God-ordained substitutionary penalty for sin – a cruel death. As a result, God the Highest Ruler and Judge pardoned and credited Jesus’ perfect righteousness to all who had faith in Him without in any way compromising His perfect standards of justice and holiness. This crediting of the Lord Jesus’ perfectly right standing before God the Absolute Ruler and Judge to the account of any who accepted Him in trusting faith was done as an undeserved gift of God.

Compared to a human courtroom

Justification is similar to the “innocent” or “not guilty” verdict pronounced by a human judge over a person charged with various crimes. When the judge officially declares this verdict, the person is regarded as just or innocent before the law, in relation to the charges against them. This is regardless of whether they were really guilty or not.

Justification before the Throne and Court of God the King of kings and Supreme Judge involves Him pronouncing us “not guilty” or “innocent” and “fully righteous”. God does this not as a form of sinful deception or mere fiction, but because a totally innocent Person – Jesus Christ – has been allowed by God to take the deserved punishment for our crimes. Because Jesus has lovingly done this, the Supreme Ruler and Judge is totally just in declaring us “pardoned”, “innocent”, “not guilty” and “totally righteous”.

Two different verdicts

Prior to being justified by God through our faith in Jesus Christ, God the Absolute Ruler and Perfect Judge declared us to be under a deserved “Courtroom of Heaven” verdict of “unrighteous rebels” and “condemned to eternal spiritual death”. But as a result of Jesus Christ’s death, God justifies those who receive Christ by faith.

The verdict of God the Supreme Ruler and Judge on those with faith in Christ is seen in Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus…”

Christ’s perfectly right legal standing imputed in justification

Jesus Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed (accounted or credited) to us through our justification by God’s grace through faith. God accounts or declares us to be perfectly righteous
in Christ. We do a “swap over” with Jesus Christ in the combined governmental decrees and legal verdicts of God the Supreme Ruler and Judge.

Because Jesus Christ offered Himself to God as our substitute, God imputed (debited) the sin of all humans to Jesus and punished Him as though He was a sinner, even though He never was a sinner (see John 14:30 and Hebrews 4:16). Then God imputes (or credits) us with Jesus’ perfectly right standing before Him. Substitution and associated justification involve a God-initiated exchange between sinful humans and Jesus Christ based on God’s love, mercy, grace, perfect justice and supreme rule.

The expression “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned”

The popular expression “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned” as an explanation for justification contains an element of truth, but misses out much of the real meaning. This expression is true in the sense it suggests justification results in God treating us as though we had never sinned and thereby have no penalty owing for our sin. But it ignores the fact justification also involves having Christ’s perfectly right status before God credited to our account.

Also the expression ‘just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned” leaves out the truth that even though God treats me as though I have never sinned, I must never forget I was a terrible sinner deserving eternal punishment and it is only through God’s grace through Jesus Christ I avoid this.

Legally blotting out our minuses and crediting Jesus’ pluses to us

Justification involves having all actual sins and the guilt of original Adamic sin forgiven. Romans 4:6-8 shows this: “Just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.’”

This can be represented by the below diagram:

```
- -
- - -
- - -
- -
```

The minuses here represent sins which are on God’s record against us.

```
     -
```

After having our sins forgiven, we have a clean record.
Forgiveness or pardon only saves us from eternal punishment in hell. But being forgiven or pardoned of all our sins is not sufficient for God the Supreme Ruler and Judge to accept us into heaven. Forgiveness of sin only leads to our being neutral in standing – neither unrighteous or right in God’s sight. This is why we need the other aspect of justification – having Jesus Christ’s perfectly right standing credited (or imputed) to our record before God the Supreme Ruler.

No half way point between justification and condemnation

We are under one of two God-given verdicts: either “not guilty and perfectly righteous in Christ” or “guilty and condemned”. There is no half-way point between these two alternatives. As Jesus said in Matthew 12:30, either we are for or against Him: “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.”

Some argue 2 Peter 3:18 and Revelation 22:11 reveal some believers can be more or less justified than other believers. This is wrong. 2 Peter 3:18 refers to growing in God’s grace in matters of holiness, discipleship, obedience and so on, but not justification.

There are only two statuses before God the Absolute Ruler and Judge – eternally condemned or declared right in Christ. Revelation 22:11 refers to those who are justified in Christ continuing to be righteous in status and daily living.

A good illustration of substitution and resulting justification

Philemon 17-18 contains a very moving illustration of the loving transfer of guilt and innocence between two people. The slave Onesimus had done great wrong to Philemon, his master. Paul loved Onesimus deeply. So Paul asked Philemon to regard Paul’s own good qualities as belonging to the slave. Paul also asked Philemon to charge to Paul’s account whatever was required to compensate Philemon for the wrongs Onesimus had committed against Philemon.

In other words, Paul asked Philemon to credit Paul’s innocence and the associated benefits occurring in Paul’s relationship to Philemon to Onesimus and to debit Onesimus’ guilt and due punishments to Paul. This is similar to how Jesus Christ lovingly asked God to do a similar swap between us and Him.

Things not included in human justice

Our being tried by God the Supreme Ruler and Judge has a number of things included in it which are not a part of normal modern law courts:
There are no witnesses appearing before God to prove our crimes against Him. God knows everything we have ever done (see 1 Corinthians 4:5 and Psalm 139:1-4). So He does not need to hear any evidence against us from others.

There is no jury to decide whether we are guilty or not.

God’s judgement of our crimes against Him and the punishment we deserve have already been pronounced by Him even before He states it at the Final Judgement (see John 3:18). Note God’s combined Throne and Court has been operating throughout all history but will have its major sessions later at the Final Judgement.

We will not obtain a lighter punishment if we plead “guilty” to our crimes against God. In human courts a plea of “guilty” will usually result in a lesser punishment than if we plead “not guilty” and then are proven guilty. Those who plead “guilty” and those who argue they are “not guilty” will all receive the same penalty – eternal separation from God in hell. Each of these people will have already previously suffered the first part of their deserved punishment – physical death.

There will be a pardon and complete forgiveness for many totally guilty humans because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Some human courts offer pardons when commanded to by a king or emperor. But mostly pardons are not given.

A totally innocent Person – Jesus Christ – has suffered the punishment of death which all guilty persons appearing before God’s combined Throne and Court will deserve.

There will be a crediting of the right standing before God of the guiltless substitute – Jesus Christ – to all the guilty persons who have received Him as Lord and Saviour.

No human judge is as strict as God in what He classifies as evil and how severely He punishes even the slightest wrong. But also no human judge is as kind and merciful as God is to people who are guilty of so many crimes and who deserve severe punishment. These crimes are primarily against the Judge Himself – God.

If we receive the Supreme Ruler and Judge’s Son as our Master and Saviour by faith, admit our guilt to the Judge, sincerely turn in our hearts from our crimes (sins), accept the Judge’s offer of pardon, forgiveness and a right status before Him because of the willing death of the Judge’s Son for us, the Judge will legally declare us “Not guilty”, “Innocent” and “Perfectly Right” in His sight.

Bible Study Questions

1. Describe justification.
2. Which verses show that justification is a legal-governmental verdict of God the Supreme Ruler and Judge?
3. Explain what the Bible teaches about God being the combined Supreme Ruler and Judge and not a judge alone?
4. Explain how 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 shows justification is a primarily court-of-law concept.
5. What is the relationship between justification and the New Covenant?
6. Explain the accounting aspects of being justified by God’s grace.
7. Why is declared justification by God’s grace not legal fiction?
8. What is God the Supreme Ruler and Judge’s verdict on us before we turned to Jesus Christ?
9. To what degree does the expression “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned” fully explain the Biblical teaching on justification?

10. Explain why we need more than forgiveness and pardon of our sins in order to go to Heaven.

11. Is it possible to be partly justified and partly condemned by God?

12. What are the things in our trial by God the Supreme Ruler and Judge which are not included as a part of normal modern law courts?