

Slavery Through Fear of Death

By Nathan Warner

“Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”
(Hebrews 2:14-15 NASB)

I was in the Montana Badlands when I stepped on a flat rock protruding from the side of a slope, and something started playing a maraca. Of all musicians, the Rattlesnake is the most arresting. It gets your attention. I can tell you that I leapt for my life. Why? Why did I react differently to that snake than to the rabbit I had seen just hours before? Well, someone had told me that a rattlesnake could kill me. I’ve never been bitten by a rattlesnake before, and I’ve never seen anyone bitten by one. Yet, I trusted that this creature could take my life, because it had a reputation.

There are things in this world that we know cause death. They make us afraid. They make us fearful because they have the potential to end life – even our life. Let’s list a few: firearms, black widow spiders, lightning, missiles, knives, heart attacks, and old age. These things make us afraid because they could kill us. Why does this frighten us? Well, death is not natural for us. We have a desire in our hearts to live forever – craving for the immortality we had in the Garden. Death frightens us. Why?

Death is an “ending” for us in this world. We need life to have meaning for us while we are alive. Oh, how mankind tries to scrape together meaning for their lives! But as death is an end of meaning for us here in the world, what a burden to justify ourselves in it if this world is all there is! Yes, we all seek to justify our existence here. Fear of death drives this need for validation, for qualification, because we crave a justified life. This need for justification is built into us, because we truly are unjustified, and we know it. We know we have sin. The world might call it “flaws,” “frailty,” or “mistakes,” but they know these things make us imperfect and condemnable. People in the world talk about wrestling with their inner “demons,” which they define as habits, insecurities, shortcomings, obsessions, etc., that persistently torment them and undermine their success and confidence. Humanity has always had a morbid fascination with “tragedy” —stories of people whose lives spiral out of control through mistakes, ego, lust, or one random choice, which they cannot seem to resist or prevent. They don’t like to define all this as sin (or the effect of sin), because sin is not something they can overcome or conquer themselves — sin by its definition makes them responsible to a higher authority (God), and this authority makes them feel worse because He shows them up by His perfection. Acknowledging His perfection, is a confession of their shortcomings.

Sin “un”-justifies us. Sin brought physical and spiritual death into the world and death drives us to seek justification physically or spiritually. The world seeks a solution to this in “conquering” death through scientific means, thus alleviating the pressure to justify ourselves in so short a life and side-stepping our responsibility to God after life has ended. This, however, is foolishness as no human effort can ever stave off responsibility to God. Death still rolls on. None of us want to die, but since we must, we want to die “justified” in the eyes of those we leave behind and/or in the eyes of those we go to after death. Unsaved humanity is a slave to justification all their days because of their fear of death.

There are many paths mankind seeks to feel justified: self-justification, justification by peer review, and justification by demons. How do you measure your validation? Are you justified in your own eyes, in the eyes of the world (or peers in the world), or in the spirit of a religion? The devil excels at making us feel the pressure of our sin nature, so that we will seek justification on his world's stage, at the feet of his idols, or in the rebellious self-justification he inspires. And if we fail? He has an answer for that too: we can turn to the comforts he has prepared for us in food, drink, drugs, sexual immorality, and anything else that will dull the ache our sin-natures inspire, albeit only for a moment.

The need for justification extends beyond sinners, as even Believers can find themselves in crisis. Have you ever asked yourself what your life is amounting to? "Am I doing everything I should do? Have I wasted my life? What am I going to leave behind? I want to do something important – something lasting." Solomon wrestled with this. He saw mankind's need for justification and reflected that "*there is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good*" (Ecclesiastes 2:24). Solomon then gives an objective perspective on mankind's justification: "*I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is futility and striving after wind*" (Ecclesiastes 1:14), "*thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was futility and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun*" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). Solomon had the means to do anything he wanted. He dulled himself in pleasures, built great monuments, reformed nations, unraveled the most complex mysteries, advanced the sciences, and surpassed every king before him in wealth, power, and splendor. And yet, he saw death waiting for him – an end of the very meaning he had been seeking to establish.

"The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Then I said to myself, 'As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?' So I said to myself, 'This too is futility.' For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:14-17). Rather than seek solace in the validation of his citizen's praises or his own self-justified analysis, Solomon looked at life from God's eternal perspective. At that moment, he was honest with himself. Rather than ignoring his condition or basking in the legacy he would leave and the fame he had garnered, he faced the reality of death and was sobered by it.

He realized that death would wipe away all that he did. All his justification would come to an end. Regardless of whether his work would last, its meaning to him would end with death. And after years, all his great work would be worn away, and others would surpass it. Even monuments and knowledge that would survive millennia would eventually come to an end. Solomon's slavery to the fear of death produced nothing that could justify him, though he labored hardest of all men and qualified more than any other. Ultimately, humanity's voice fades and its validation ends. Nothing we do can validate us in the eyes of eternity. Nothing we do can justify ourselves before God. Jesus declared to the Pharisees, "***You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God***" (Luke 16:15).

The only lasting and allowable justification for your life that is available comes from God and is no work of your own. God alone has the answer to Solomon's despair and the vain struggles of all mankind. It is given equally to drug addicts and dictators, cleaning ladies and oil tycoons — regardless of their "qualifications." "*So then as through one transgression there resulted*

*condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted **justification of life to all men***” (Romans 5:18) and resurrection to eternal life—a conquered grave.

But to receive this justification of life, mankind must surrender their self-justification, the world’s validation, and the justification of false teachings. They must seek the justification from God, available only through faith in and obedience to His Son, Jesus Christ, because God sent Jesus to justify us – freeing us from the need to be justified. How did He accomplish this? By taking our sin upon Himself and entering death to conquer it in resurrection, He destroyed its power and freed us from fear of it. He freed us by offering us His friendship and protection, that if anyone were to ask if we were “good enough” or if we “measure up,” He would step in and answer “yes.” He answers for us. That friendship requires us to serve Him as King in our lives. As His subjects, we are justified by association with Him. *“Therefore, having been **justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ**”* (Romans 5:1). No longer must we scramble about seeking validation for our lives, because Jesus has become the only justification that matters – justification before the Holiness of eternal and omnipotent God. Only this lasts beyond the grave. People who don’t accept Christ’s justification will always seek for justification elsewhere, but they will never find anything lasting nor that will stand up to God’s measure.

Those who have not been justified by faith in Jesus will be resurrected after the Millennial Reign of Christ on earth to be judged at the Great White Throne Judgment. Here, Jesus will sit to judge the deeds of the whole world. At this throne, all other justifications will be tried and found inadequate. People without Christ’s justification will realize they are truly still unqualified, invalidated, condemned before God’s measure of justification. Self-justifications, peer-justification, and idol-justification will be shown clearly to be wholly deficient against the pure, holy justice of God.

We who have His justification as our own will be raised from death and “caught away” to be with Jesus. We who are Christ’s will rise from death into His justification, which covers us for eternity — our sin forever removed. The death in our bodies, caused by sin, will be banished. We will live forever with Him in His righteous government on earth and on the new earth. Amen.