

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith (Heb. 11.7).

Introduction

In the last message, we examined the first half of Hebrews 11.7 and covered the example of Noah's obedient faith in both Genesis and Hebrews. We found this subject to be clear, right through to very meaningful applications to our walk with God. Thus, 11.7a says, **By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household.**

In this context, the question of the relationship of the works of obedience to justification surfaces in an acute way. This has some prickliness to it, but we must work through the difficulties because this discussion brings us to the very heart of gospel good news.

So, our task for today is to examine the last half of the text (Heb. 11.7b) to understand "Noah's Righteousness by Faith." The outline of this subject has three points: the declaration of Noah's righteousness, the problem of his righteousness, and the ground of his righteousness.

1A. The declaration of Noah's righteousness

Three observations confirm the fact that justification is in view in this passage.

1) First, the language descriptive of Noah in both Genesis and Hebrews is justification language. Moses states that he is righteous (Gen. 6.9) and the preacher to the Hebrews calls him an heir of righteousness (11.7b). To justify is to declare someone righteous. It is a judicial act of the courtroom that proclaims the absence of guilt and the presence of righteousness.

2) Second, Hebrews 11.7b gives commentary on Genesis 7.1 regarding what occurred on the eve of the flood. Moses informs us that God made a declaration of Noah's righteousness, declaring to him **Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation** (Gen. 7.1). In a commentary on this declaration, the writer to the Hebrews considers it to be the point in time when Noah **became an heir of ... righteousness** (11.7b) and his commentary on 7.1 indicates that the orbit of thought is justification.

3) Third, the structure of Hebrews 11.7b has condemnation in contrast with righteousness, which suggests the *condemnation* of the world by Noah in contrast to the *justification* of Noah by God.

This text does relate to the doctrine of justification by faith that we have in the writings of Paul (especially Romans and Galatians). Figuring out how it relates is both our challenge and privilege. There is always a benefit hidden in the challenges of Scripture, and like paradoxes and parables, they call for a seeking faith. We will not find unless we seek; the truth is hidden to those who do not search the word of God the way someone searches for buried treasure. On the flip side, those who seek will find but not necessarily early on; it may take some persistent digging. This brings up the problem of Noah's righteousness. To that we now turn in the best way possible: with seeking hearts.

2A. The problem of Noah's righteousness

The flavor of justification in the passage causes us to confront the difficulty of how the writer connects Noah's obedience with Noah becoming an heir of righteousness that is by faith. Our challenge begins with the little phrase "by this." It is without question that "by this" refers to Noah's obedience in building the ark: by his reverent fear in building the ark, Noah condemned the world and became an heir of righteousness. This seems to pull us in the opposite direction away from the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works. It makes us think that the obedience of Noah was the basis upon which he was declared righteous or justified.

How then does Hebrews 11.7 harmonize with the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works? If we clarify that doctrine then the problem becomes even more acute.

For clarity, note that works in the phrase “faith alone apart from works” refer to the idea of meriting or earning God’s acceptance and favor by our works of the law. That is what Paul denies in Romans 4. (Romans 4:4-8 ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin”). If you receive God’s declaration that you are righteous on the basis of your works then what you receive is not God’s grace but “your due.” The declaration of your righteousness is something you earned as a wage. Thus, justification by faith alone stands in contrast to the idea of earning God’s favor and states that justification is for **the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness** (Rom. 4.5).

How then can Noah become an heir of righteousness “by this” obedience to all that God commanded him regarding the construction of the ark? Noah may predate the giving of the Law but he clearly hears and heeds God’s commandments. The problem is not solved by the consideration that Noah lived long before the Law that the opponents of Paul appealed to for justification by law-works.

Nor can we appeal for an easy solution to the faith and faith-filled nature of the obedience of Noah. If we grant that Noah’s obedience manifested his faith, it is still the case that Noah became an heir of righteousness by building the ark. He did his work faithfully, with faith-filled fear and the accent is surely on the faithful work, on his faithful obedience, and thus on his obedience. “By this” refers to his construction works that accorded with God’s commandments.

We have justification here in some way and the “by this” phrase on the surface tells us that by his work of building the ark, God justified Noah declaring him to be an heir of righteousness. With the problem on the table, let us now consider the ground of Noah’s righteousness to go below the surface to a deep-rooted understanding.

3A. The ground of Noah’s righteousness

Probably, the most important word to guide us to the ground of Noah’s righteousness is the word heir. That Noah became an *heir* is not from Genesis but from the writer to the Hebrews. It is an overlay by the writer of Hebrews on Genesis 7.1. Accordingly, the notion of an heir of righteousness must have the coloring of the teaching of the book of Hebrews. We can see what that color is by listing some passages that furnish us with dots that we can then connect together.

From the beginning of the book, Jesus is *the heir par excellence*. The Son of God incarnate is the heir of all things (Heb. 1.2). If anyone else is an heir of anything from the Lord, it must be in and through Christ.

Jesus loved righteousness (Heb. 1.9) and became a royal high priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 6.20). This made Him the guarantor of a better covenant; He is one who saves His people through all times and circumstances (Heb. 7.22-27: he saves to the uttermost). In Hebrews 9.15-17, we learn that Jesus became the mediator of the new covenant so that we who are called may become heirs: ¹⁵ **Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.** ¹⁶ **For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established.** ¹⁷ **For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.** Those God calls to salvation receive **the promised eternal inheritance** or become heirs with Christ by His death because **a will takes effect only at death**. Thus, the death of our Lord secured redemptive release from transgressions (Heb. 9.15) *and perfected His people in holiness of the law* (Hebrews 10:14-16 ¹⁴ **For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.** ¹⁵ **And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,** ¹⁶ **“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds).** Based on this perfect righteousness

that Jesus secured for us on the cross, God is in the process of sanctifying us: we are being sanctified; the perfected are being sanctified (10.14). Because He is our priest forever after the order of Melchizedek **by the power of an indestructible life** (Heb. 7.16), that is, by His resurrection, He makes His covenant children heirs of an eternal inheritance that includes the marvelous gift of His perfect righteousness (granted perfectly on the cross and progressively over time).

How does this all relate to Noah? Answering this question is the way to solve the larger problem of his righteousness. We can do this by asking some sub-questions.

1) What does it mean for him to be an heir?

The writer to the Hebrews interprets the Genesis account of Noah. Pointedly, he tells us that Noah became an heir with Christ of His righteousness as an eternal inheritance that is based on and effectively flows from the death of the guarantor of the new covenant. Therefore, Noah became an heir of righteousness that is not his own. It is something beyond his righteousness of obedience building the ark. It is *perfect* righteousness and it has its basis, ground, and foundation in the life and death of Christ. He became an heir of perfect righteousness.

2) How did he come to possess this righteousness?

It is the righteousness that comes by faith. We have to keep the last phrases of 11.7b firmly in mind: **he...became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith**. When we combine the fact that the righteousness is the perfect righteousness of Christ with the fact that it comes by faith, we must conclude that “by faith” implies that it is not by Noah’s obedience. This perspective of the preacher to the Hebrews that looks at God’s declaration to Noah (Gen. 7.1) ought to control how we understand Noah’s obedience and the phrase “by this.”

3) When did Noah receive the righteousness that comes by faith?

He received this righteousness when he first believed. The narrator, in Genesis by the Holy Spirit, summarized the life of Noah by the word righteous. He tells us that Noah was a righteous and blameless man who walked with God. *Clearly, Noah did not become a righteous man by means of his work on the ark*. He was a righteous man and out of the context of his walk with God he heard God’s warning and heeded it.

What is not so clear in Genesis becomes clear in Hebrews, namely, Noah’s faith in God’s promise (of restoration through the promised seed of Eve, Gen. 3.15) made him a possessor of the righteousness of Christ the guarantor. As guarantor, our Lord’s death supplies righteousness and life to the children of the eternal covenant. Of course, Noah possessed this righteousness on credit based on the work of the coming seed of Eve. He possessed it from the beginning of his life as a saint by God’s election and calling (Gen. 6.8).

The timing of his possession of righteousness relates to the righteousness of his life that was real though tainted. It explains how it is that his imperfect righteousness could be so highly appraised on one hand (Gen. 6.9, Noah was “righteous and blameless”) and how it could allow him access to fellowship with God, so he could walk with God (6.9). In other words, the high appraisal (as if it his righteousness were perfect) and his access to God was given was due to a righteousness not his own that he obtained by faith. That meant that his sin-tainted faithfulness was acceptable to God as perfect righteousness and that gave him fellowship with God. All along, the walk he had with God was grounded in something more and beyond his own actions as a saintly-sinner.

4) When did God justify Noah according to Hebrews 11.7, a comment on Genesis 7.1?

God justified Noah after his faithful construction works were finished and the day of the flood judgment dawned. Immediately, we should note that Hebrews 11.7b gives us a nuance about justification that is distinct from what we usually think of when we discuss Paul’s doctrine. That is, we usually think about that aspect of justification that pertains to the beginning of the life of a believer. We are justified by faith and that means that when we come to faith in Christ that is the time when we receive the righteousness of Christ as our own; His becomes ours. That gives

us perfect standing before God. We call that “justification” because it takes place in the heavenly courtroom where God declares that we have the perfect righteousness of Christ and all that goes with being joint-heirs with Him.

Clearly, Hebrews 11.7b deals with a different aspect of justification. Of course, this is not a different justification. It is another component in the larger biblical doctrine. The Westminster catechisms help us see this. Question 38 of the WSC asks: “What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?” WLC Q 90 modifies the question slightly: “What shall be done to the righteous at the day of judgment?” The answer is: “At the resurrection, [the day of judgment, LC, 90] believers being raised up in glory...shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted...and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God...to all eternity.” This is a great statement regarding things as yet unseen. Inescapably, the language here of vindication (of being acquitted) is the language of justification. In other words, according to this reformed confession, justification not only has a present aspect, but it also has a future aspect.

This is helpful with respect to the case of Noah. In fact, Noah’s case helps us understand the richness of the doctrine of justification. That is true because Noah became an heir of righteousness in the sense that he was declared to be an heir of the perfect righteousness of Christ on the Day of (flood) Judgment. On that fearful day, God openly acknowledged and acquitted Noah before the entire world that fell under the heavy hand of His righteous retribution. The open and public vindication of Noah means that at the world’s end on the Day of Judgment by a flood God declared that Noah had righteousness far beyond the real but sin-tainted and repentance-oriented righteousness of his upright life. God declared Him to be an heir of the righteousness of Christ in the very context of judgment and in monumental contrast to the world that perished.

Conclusion

Noah’s justification, per Hebrews on the notion of being an heir, has its rock bottom foundation and basis in the work of Christ, the heir of all things. This applies to you as well.

1) As heirs in Christ, your obedience is not your true righteousness

The writer to the Hebrews informs us that when God told Noah that he was righteous “before me,” that that meant much more than “you have obeyed me in faithfully building the ark.” It meant that Noah possessed an inheritance of a righteousness not his own. His justification (per Hebrews on Genesis) was the declaration that his obedience in building the ark (his tainted righteousness) was not his true righteousness. That is critical. It was not his ultimate righteousness or the reason that he was allowed to walk with God from the beginning of his life of faith. Likewise, you can walk with God as Noah did with the law written on your hearts now in a partial way, but not yet in a perfect way. In the meantime, by faith, you have the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to you are your own.

2) As heirs in Christ, your obedience does not earn deliverance from judgment.

It was necessary that Noah obey in building the ark. Without obedience, he would have perished in the flood. But his obedience did not merit the favor and grace of God. It did not give him protection from the wrath of God. That it could not do. Noah was a sinner: a saintly sinner, a righteous sinner. What he needed was perfect righteousness to withstand the storms of an outraged justice. That he received from Christ alone by faith alone when God called him. Likewise, the book of Hebrews makes it quite clear that obedient, persevering faith is required for entry into the heavenly Canaan but your perseverance does not earn deliverance. What you need in the face of God’s wrath on the Day of Judgment, you have in Christ: perfect righteousness, His perfect righteousness.

This is the gospel for you as you await the final judgment yet unseen. God’s promise is that when your life of obedient-sin-tainted-repentant-faith runs its course and you stand before the throne of God, He has a blessing to give you on that day that flows out of your obedient faith.

The blessing is His declaration that you have righteousness far greater than all of your attainments; He will announce it for all to hear that His covenant children have the perfect righteousness of Christ. This promise, as yet unseen, encourages us to good works of obedient faith at the same time that it highlights the one and only foundation of our acceptance with God, namely, the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thus, the text encourages us to *trust* God's word about the future, to have *faith*-filled fear, and to strive (in earnest) after the obedience of *faith* by keeping our aim on all of God's commands; that is, by keeping our aim on the Lord and His perfect holiness.

Let us fall down before the majesty of the Lord our righteousness to give Him thankful praise for the eternal inheritance that is ours because He obtained it for us on the cross. To the triune God be all glory now and forevermore, amen.