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God's Gospel to Abraham

The first twelve chapters of Genesis provide a short introduction to world history, beginning with the creation of the universe and God's purposes for humanity to be part of His family and rule over Earth. After man's sin corrupts the material universe, God reveals the gospel, His plan to rescue and restore all things. Even so, mankind becomes so wicked that God has to cleanse the world with a great flood. The remaining chapters of Genesis present the history of Abraham, his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob, and his twelve great-grandsons, the patriarchs of the Israelites, and how God works to accomplish His purposes through them.

Noah, Abraham's ancestor, was 600 years old at the time of the Great Flood. After the Great Flood, Noah lived another 350 years, dying around 2000 BC, about the time Abraham was born. Noah's son, Shem, lived to be 600 years old, dying when Abraham was about 150 years old.

Children love to be entertained with stories, especially stories told by their grandparents. Think about how many times Shem's grandchildren probably asked him: "Grandpa, tell us the story of how God saved you from the Great Flood"?

Compared to the much shorter lives of their sons and grandsons, Noah and Shem seemed to have lived “forever.”

The climax of early human history in Genesis is when God calls Abraham and presents the gospel to him. It is amazing how much God accomplished through the legacy of one old man who believed the gospel, having faith in God’s promise to do the impossible. In his calling, his belief in God’s word, and his justification by faith, Abraham is the quintessential example for “all those who believe” and “walk in [his] steps of faith” (Rom 4:11-12). If anyone wants to become a child of God (and thus be reconciled to God), he must follow Abraham’s example and likewise be justified by faith.

God Calls Abraham

Certainly, since Abraham was a descendent of Shem, he had often heard the stories of Adam and Eve and how God preserved Noah’s family through the Great Flood. When God called Abraham, he was no more worthy of God’s favor than any other man. Abraham’s father, Terah, was an idolater who lived in Ur of the Chaldeans near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. When Abraham was about seventy years old, he and his father left Ur and moved to Haran, near the source of the Euphrates.

God’s call to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3:

Get out of your country,
 From your family
 And from your father’s house,
 To a land that I will show you.
 I will make you a great nation;
 I will bless you
 And make your name great;
 And you shall be a blessing.
 I will bless those who bless you,
 And I will curse him who curses you;
 And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

God’s Call

-biblically, God invites someone to be in His family, to live with Him in His Kingdom, and to serve Him.

God calls men through the hearing of His gospel even while they are still in bondage to sin and condemned to death

(see Fig. 4.1). The purpose of God's call is to invite all who hear the gospel to become part of His family, to live with Him in His Kingdom, and to serve Him.

When God invites someone to be in His Kingdom, He desires that the one called be in His family and live with Him in His house forever (the New Jerusalem will be God's everlasting home, Rev 21:3). Sometimes His call includes a particular assignment for which He will prepare that person.

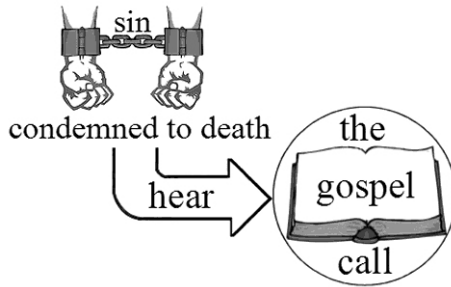


Fig. 4.1 The Gospel Call

For example, Samuel was a young boy when God called him. Samuel's call is a bit comical because, at first, neither he nor his mentor, Eli the high priest, understands what is happening.

While Samuel was lying down . . . the LORD called Samuel. And he answered, "Here I am!"

So he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

And [Eli] said, "I did not call; lie down again." And he went and lay down.

Then the LORD called yet again, "Samuel!"

So Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

He answered, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

(Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor was the word of the LORD yet revealed to him.) And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. So he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you did call me."

Then Eli perceived that the LORD had called the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if

He calls you, that you must say, ‘Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”

And Samuel answered, “Speak, for Your servant hears.” (1Sam 3:3-10).

Samuel does “not yet know the LORD;” nevertheless, when God calls, he responds immediately to God’s call and is ready to serve Him.

The Bible also records how God called Paul. When Paul is on the road to Damascus, Christ calls him in quite a dramatic event. Suddenly, a bright light from heaven bursts upon Paul and his traveling companions and temporarily blinds Paul. Then Jesus asks him, “Why are you persecuting me?” Paul falls to the ground and responds, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 9:3-15).¹

These examples of God’s calling illustrate how God expects those in His family to serve Him.

God Presents the Gospel to Abraham

When God called Abraham, He included the gospel. The gospel promise which God presented to Abraham reveals additional details of His plan of salvation, building on the foundation of the proto-gospel given to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15).

Paul’s commentary in Galatians 3:8 confirms the fact that God’s call to Abraham included the gospel:

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham before-hand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”

The “gospel” in this text might not conform to the expectations of modern theological traditions concerning Paul’s emphasis of justification by faith. Nonetheless, in Galatians, Paul declares that the gospel message presented to Abraham is found in this

¹ Ephesians 1-3 describes at length the calling of New Testament believers.

statement, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."² Paul also explains that the gospel offers everyone, both Jew and Gentile, the opportunity to believe, be justified by faith, and be blessed like Abraham. Both the proto-gospel in Genesis 3:15 and the gospel message in Genesis 12:3 include all of humanity in God's plan of salvation.

Abraham Believes God

About ten years after God called Abraham (in Gen 12:1-3), Scriptures record Abraham's belief in God and his justification by faith (in Gen 15:6). Approximately ten years have elapsed. Why is his belief not described before this? Before answering this question, one should consider the context of Abraham's faith, recorded in Genesis.

Context of Abraham's Belief

When Abraham moves to the Promised Land, his nephew Lot tags along with him. Eventually, a conflict erupts between Lot's shepherds and Abraham's shepherds. Abraham suggests, in order to keep peace between their shepherds, that they separate their flocks to graze in different pastures. For his sheep, Lot chooses the best pastures, which just happen to be near the wicked city of Sodom, so Abraham takes his flocks elsewhere (Gen 13:8-9).

Lot's choice is unfortunate for many reasons. This is especially true the day that four kings from the north come and conquer Sodom, killing and capturing its inhabitants (including Lot and his family) and plundering all their possessions. As these victorious kings are hauling away their spoils of war, Abraham hears of Lot's fate and ventures forth with his own hired men. They rescue Lot and his family, along with the rest of the captives, from the northern armies (Gen 14).

Abraham returns in triumph, but he does not exercise his right as conqueror to become their king and claim the rescued

² This gospel to Abraham is repeated in Genesis 12:3; 18:18 and 22:18. It is also presented to Isaac (Gen 26:4) and to Jacob (Gen 28:14).

captives and all the spoils of battle as his own possessions. So, the King of Sodom offers to give him a reward, a percentage of all the spoils which he recovered. Abraham refuses because he does not want any man to take credit saying, “I have made Abraham rich” (Gen 14:23).

Abraham’s Question Concerning God’s Promise

After the excitement of rescuing Lot, God reminds Abraham, “I am your shield and your exceeding great reward” (Gen 15:1). Hearing God speak of rewards, Abraham rather bluntly asks Him this question: “What can you give me since I am still childless?” (Gen 15:2). The irony is that the wicked King of Sodom wanted to reward him, yet Abraham refused him. On the other hand, God had promised long ago to reward Abraham and still had not delivered on His promise. When God called Abraham, He had promised to give him seed (many descendants), and after all these years Abraham still had none. God responds to his question by reminding him of His gospel promise and assuring him that his heir will come from his own body and that his seed will be as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:4-5; cf. 12:1-3).

Abraham’s Response to God’s Promise

Without any fanfare to mark the great importance of this event, Scripture records Abraham’s response to God’s promise: Abraham believes God (Gen 15:6). When Abraham heard God’s word of promise, Abraham *believed it to be true*.

Genesis 15:6 is the first time the Hebrew word translated “believe” is used in the Old Testament. The next time this word is used is when Joseph “verified to be true” the words of his brothers (Gen 42:20). After this, the word is used again when Jacob could not “believe to be true” the report that Joseph was alive and ruling in Egypt (Gen 45:26).

Believe

-to accept or trust something as true (noun- “belief” or “faith”).

Why did God wait until this particular event in Abraham's life to describe his faith? Had not Abraham already believed God before this time? Had not Abraham left his country and his father's house to go to another land? Yes, apparently Abraham had believed God before the events of Genesis 15 (cf. Heb 11:8) and therefore he was seeking the city of God (Heb 11:10).

However, this question remains, "If Abraham believed earlier than this, then why was his prior belief not included earlier in the historical record of Genesis?" Why indeed? This is a most important question.

We must trust God's Word to teach us truth progressively. As a matter of fact, prior to the account of Abraham's belief in Genesis 15, the Bible does not record anyone's belief. Does this mean that no one else had believed the gospel before this time? Certainly not; many others, such as Abel, Seth, Enoch and Noah, had also believed God's gospel promise, and therefore did not die while still condemned by their sin. The fact that God had not recorded anyone's previous response of belief is very significant; undoubtedly, He omitted from the biblical record all details relating to others' belief for a good reason. It seems that God was waiting for the best context to illustrate someone's belief in His gospel and the results of such belief. Abraham becomes God's illustration.

Abraham is Justified by Faith

In God's plan of salvation, "justification by faith" is the momentous event which occurs when someone believes God's gospel promise. Abraham's example provides the essential definition of "justification by faith": whenever someone "believe[s] in the LORD, [God] account[s] it to him for righteousness" (Gen 15:6; cf. Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6).

God's Book of Accounts

"So what?" someone might ask, "What is the big deal? Why is 'accounted righteousness' so important?"

This statement defining justification by faith is of tremendous importance because of what it reveals concerning salvation. It reveals that God keeps recorded accounts (such accounting is done in books³). During this historical event, God has Abraham's name written in a register and places a credit of righteousness in Abraham's account. This divine book must include both a registry of names and a ledger of accounts recording credits of righteousness (instead of credits of money).

Registering the names of all the citizens born in a city or community is an ancient custom still observed in some European communities. (In many places, this custom seems to have morphed into the recording of birth certificates.) This ancient practice helps to explain the significance of God's Book of Life,⁴ which contains a register of the names of the citizens of His city (Heb 12:23). Apparently, whenever someone believes God's gospel and becomes a child (heir) in the family of God, his name is written in the Book of Life (the register of His city) and a credit of righteousness is recorded after the name.

God's Legal Transactions

God has promised to judge everyone according to his deeds: "For [God] repays man according to his work" (Job 34:11; cf. Ps 62:12; Prv 24:12; Eccl 3:17; Jer 17:10; Rom 2:6). Therefore, God keeps records of the deeds of men: "The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them" (Eze 18:20, NIV). Concerning the righteous, Jesus confirmed that when He comes He "will reward each according to his works" (Mt 16:27). God's records will not be lost, neither will they contain any clerical

³ God keeps book(s) which record the deeds of men (Dan 7:9-10; Mal 3:16; Rev 20:12, 15).

⁴ Throughout history, birth records helped to prove one's ancestry and citizenship in a city or nation (Neh 7:64). Jesus told His disciples to rejoice because their "names are written in Heaven." (Lk 10:20; cf. Ex 32:32; Dt 9:14; 29:20; Ps 69:28; 87:1-6; 109:13; 2Ki 14:27 Isa 4:3; Jer 17:13; Dan 12:1; Phl 4:3; Heb 12:23; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 22:27). See pages 110-111 and 352-353 for more about the Book of Life.

errors. At the final judgment of unrighteous men, their deeds, having also been recorded in God's books, will be presented as evidence to justify their condemnation (Rev 20:12-15).

Here is the question: if God judges every man according to his deeds, does this mean that everyone will be condemned? Certainly it is true that every man has been under the condemnation of death ever since Adam sinned and lost man's righteous standing before God. Furthermore, since every man is a sinner, every man's own sinful deeds confirm his unrighteousness. However, here is the good news of God's gospel plan: man's loss of righteousness can be rectified in a legal transaction described as "justification by faith."

In his justification by faith, Abraham illustrates how a sinful person who is deserving of condemnation can be rescued from everlasting death and become righteous in the sight of God (Gal 3:11). So, what actually happened when Abraham was justified by faith?

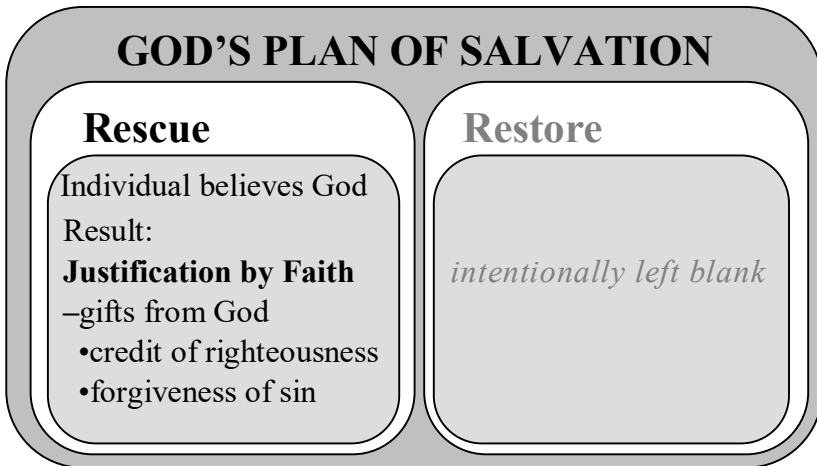


Fig. 4.2 God's Plan to Rescue Man Through Justification by Faith

In legal transactions, God gives at least two gifts to Abraham when he is justified by faith. God accredits a gift of righteousness to Abraham's account. (This righteousness

comes from a source other than Abraham). Besides this credit of righteousness, God forgives Abraham's sins (see Fig. 4.2).

David explains the connection between these gifts: "Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity," but instead, He "imputes righteousness" (Ps 32:2; cf. Rom 4:6-8). In order to rescue Abraham from the everlasting consequences of sin, God forgives his sin. At the same time, instead of recording Abraham's sin, God credits his account with a gift of righteousness which grants him a righteous standing like that which Adam had before his sin in the Garden of Eden. In this noteworthy event benefiting someone who believes Him, God begins to fulfill His promise to rescue (and restore) all things (see Fig. 4.2, also see Fig. 3.3, p. 37).

In legal matters, justification⁵ is the opposite of condemnation. During a judicial proceeding, the officers of the court often attempt to demonstrate that someone's actions were right or wrong. Based on the evidence presented, one might be convicted or acquitted. In the case of all mankind, when God judged Adam's sin, everyone was condemned to death. Paul explains, "Through one man sin entered the world, and death because of sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all have sinned" (Rom 5:12).

Justification

-demonstration that one acted rightly; a judicial action to set things right.

Judicially, standing before God, man can escape the condemnation of sin and its penalty (death) by means of "justification by faith." In this legal action, God, the Judge of all, removes the one who "believes God" from condemned

⁵ In the Old Testament, *tsadaq* means "to set right that which was wrong." Judicially, it is to establish that someone's actions were right or wrong. Therefore, judges were to "justify [*tsadaq*] the righteous [*tsaddiyq*], and condemn the wicked" (Dt 25:1). The abstract noun, "righteousness" (*tsēdaqah*), is used to describe God's credit to Abraham's account (Gen 15:6). In the New Testament, the Greek word *dikaioō* means to "judge, set right; justify." This verse is interesting: "That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged" (Rom 3:4; cf. 1Tim 3:16).

humanity and has his name written in His city's register ("written in Heaven" Lk 10:20; Jn 3:18; Heb 11:10, 16; 12:23). Additionally, God gives a credit of righteousness, which is recorded in the city register in the believer's newly-formed account, so that from that moment onward he will be recognized as a "righteous" man in the Kingdom of God. The righteousness which is accredited to his account is not based on his own merits; this first credit of righteousness comes as a gift from God. Justification by faith is how God reconciles a sinful human (who believes His gospel) to Himself (2Cor 5:19-21).

When a human judge is presiding over a judicial proceeding, a known criminal might be declared "not guilty" because of manipulated evidence or a legal technicality. God detests such travesties of justice—wicked men fraudulently being declared righteous (Prv 17:15). Contrariwise, when God justifies a believer, the conclusion is not fraudulent.

When God presides over the transaction described as "justification by faith" there are legal transfers of debt and righteousness. The first legal transfer is by substitution: although the sinner is responsible to pay the penalty for his sin, someone else who is willing takes the sinner's place and pays the sinner's debt (the penalty). The second legal transfer is by imputation: righteousness from the One who paid the sinner's debt is imputed to the sinner and is credited to his account; the sinner has now become righteous in God's eyes (Rom 3:24-25; Phil 3:8-9). Thus, when Christ died on the cross, God was able to balance these accounts: the debt for mankind's sin was transferred to Christ, and the gifts of righteousness which were previously credited to believers' accounts were debited from Christ's account. Furthermore, the righteousness of Christ is still available for anyone who will believe, and it will be credited to him when he is justified by faith.

Additionally, justification by faith is not probationary, only to be suspended at the moment of one's next sin.⁶ Neither is it

⁶ After being justified by faith, Abraham lied to Abimelech about his relationship with his wife Sarah, (Gen 20:2), demonstrating that, even

temporary, like the atonement which resulted from the yearly sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, which could provide only a temporary covering for sin (Heb 10:1-10).⁷ In contrast, God's justification of Abraham has permanent results: reconciling him to God,⁸ permanently forgiving his sin, and accrediting righteousness to his account (see Fig. 4.3).

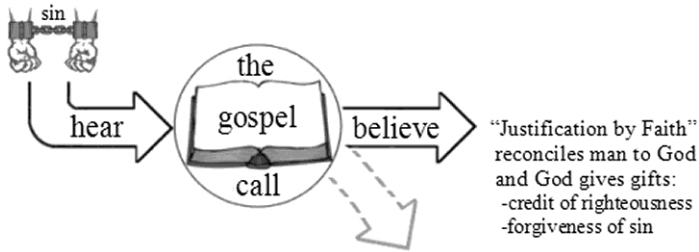


Fig. 4.3 Abraham is Justified by his Belief in the Gospel

God's Timing, Waiting to Explain Belief

Remember earlier, when it was suggested that God had purposefully waited until this event in Abraham's life to record his response of belief and justification by faith? (Keep in mind that Genesis 15:6 marks the first time the word "believe" is used in Scripture.) Here is the likely reason why God waited: in this context, Abraham has not done anything described as obedience to God's commands. The first time that "belief" is made the point of scriptural discussion, no other distracting issues are present or included in the discussion. Justification by faith is not because of one's obedience, it is not based on one's good works, neither is it a

though he was justified by faith, he did not always act righteously. In spite of his subsequent sin, Abraham remained justified before God.

⁷ Christ offered Himself as the final, once for all, Sacrifice.

⁸ The permanent basis for man's reconciliation in the Old Testament was the atonement purchased by the future sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross (Jn 1:29; Rom 3:25-26; 5:9-11; 2Cor 5:18-21; Heb 9:7-28; 10:8-10; 12:24; 13:11-12; 1Pet 1:19-20).

reward for one's keeping covenant⁹ commands—none of these issues are present in this context to cloud the simple fact that Abraham believed God's promise and God justified him.

Certainly, the righteousness accredited to Abraham's account was not earned by human merit. God was not under any obligation to justify Abraham. Salvation is a gift; by His grace God justifies freely (Rom 3:24; Eph 2:8-9). God's gift of righteousness in justification by faith must not be confused with any of God's covenant promises or rewards. Abraham's justification by faith could not have been a reward for his obedience to a covenant, because one did not yet exist; God had not yet made a covenant with him. Referring to this occasion, Paul emphasizes: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about" (Rom 4:2). Clearly, in his justification by faith, Abraham was not justified by good works and therefore could not boast that his good works had somehow saved him.

Paul further explains how Abraham believed in God who promised to do the impossible:

[Abraham] did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Rom 4:20-22).

God justified Abraham, reconciled him to Himself, simply because of his belief in God's gospel promise.

⁹ An objection might be made that in the context of Abraham's justification by faith there is a covenant. Yes, immediately after Abraham is justified by faith (Gen 15:6) God makes a covenant with him (Gen 15:9-21). In fact, this covenant, made after Abraham's justification by faith, is in response to his request for assurance that he would "be an heir" of the Promised Land (Gen 15:8). In this covenant, God guarantees that Abraham is an heir of the Promised Land. However, when God makes this covenant, Abraham is not required to pass between the covenant sacrifices; therefore, the covenant places no obligations on Abraham (there are no covenant terms or commands which he is required to obey). God is the only One obligated to keep the terms of this covenant.

God's Gift of Righteousness

Why is this fact—that Abraham was justified because of his belief in God's promise—so important? Why must one's good works or obedience to God's covenant not be included when God accredits this righteousness in justification by faith? For this simple reason: man is incapable of earning the credit of righteousness which reconciles him to God; therefore, this righteousness must come as a gift.

Paul explains the difference between a gift (grace) and wages: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but debt" (Rom 4:4). Paul clarifies that if someone could be justified (reconciled to God) by doing good works, then instead of paying "death" for a sinner's wages, God would be paying "righteousness" to a sinner (Rom 6:23); this cannot happen. Think of it this way: if a sinner could earn favor with God by performing a certain number of good deeds, then God would become a "debtor," obligated to a sinner, to someone who is still under the dominion of sin and Satan. Again, this could never happen!

As long as anyone is under the dominion of sin and Satan, his "works of righteousness" are worthless. In God's sight, all such worthless works of righteousness are "filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). The good deeds of an unbeliever will not count for anything when he is judged. Even if an unbeliever obeys God's Law (His commandments), his works cannot justify him (reconcile him to God); one can only be justified by faith:

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness. . . . Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or is

He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Rom 3:20-30).

Human sin has separated us from God, making all of us enemies against Him; we cannot by any amount of good works reconcile ourselves to God or place Him in our debt.

Besides, God does not need anything which anyone might try to offer to Him. Even an eternity of doing good works could not reconcile a sinner to God or begin to place God in his debt. Neither can someone bribe God with good deeds which are already expected to be done as one's moral duty. Furthermore, God, being the righteous Judge of the universe, always does what is right. When we are judged, each of us will have to give God an account of our life and actions.

The ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish (Ps 1:5-6).

As sinners, we do not have the ability to pay the penalty for our sins. In fact, our continuing sinfulness proves that we are still enemies of God. We are prisoners in bondage to sin, and as long as we remain slaves to sin, none of our good deeds can be accounted as righteousness. What mankind needs is a mediator who will help us become reconciled to God. God knows about our predicament and has promised to provide what we need—the Savior—Someone who is righteous and is both willing and able to pay the debt (penalty) we owe for our sin.

God has provided everything a person needs to be reconciled to Him. You ask, "What is the source of this righteousness which reconciles a believer to God?" The New Testament reveals that God's gift of righteousness comes from only one source: the Messiah, Jesus Christ our Savior (Rom 3:22; Phil 3:9).

If you have not yet believed God's gospel promise, listen to this good news: justification by faith is made available to you as a gift. If you believe God's gospel promise, God will rescue you from the bondage of sin and freely accredit righteousness to your account, giving you a righteous standing before Him (Rom 3:28; 4:3-8). Through justification by faith, you can have your sins forgiven, be reconciled to God, and become a child in His family.