

Session 4: Justified

God's verdict makes new

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers what justification is: God, by sheer grace, truly making a sinner right with himself, and discovers from Abraham's own story that Scripture shows justification really conferred at a beginning (Trent calls it a translation into the state of grace; CCC 1992 locates it in Baptism) and then genuinely increased and proved across a life: a living relationship, not a filing.

Catholic Touchstone. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (CCC 1989, quoting the Council of Trent). When God declares a sinner righteous, his word accomplishes what it says: he does not merely file a new verdict about us; he makes a new creation of us (2 Cor 5:17). And this justification "is conferred in Baptism" (CCC 1992), which is why last week comes first.

What You Need to Know

The word "justification" makes people's eyes glaze, and it should not, because it names the biggest question a human being can ask: how does someone like me get right with someone like God? Tonight needs two moves. First, the group must feel the sheer gift of it, because Paul is relentless on this: "they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24); God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:5); "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom 5:1). Nothing in Session 4 takes back a syllable of Session 2. Initial justification is utterly unearned; the Council of Trent opens its justification decree by saying exactly that, and anathematizes anyone who says we can be justified by our own works without grace.

Second, the group must see what the gift *is*. Here Catholics and classical Protestants genuinely differ, and you should be able to state both sides cleanly. In the classical Protestant account, justification is *forensic*: a courtroom declaration in which Christ's righteousness is credited (imputed) to the believer's account while the believer remains, in himself, a sinner; Luther's traditional tag is *simul iustus et peccator*, at once righteous and a sinner. (The classical Reformed add, emphatically, that God also regenerates and sanctifies everyone he justifies; their claim is only that this renewal is distinct from the forensic ground of the verdict.) The Catholic account agrees the language of reckoning and verdict is really there (Rom 4 uses accounting words), but holds that when God declares, reality obeys. The God who said "Let there be light" and got light does not issue verdicts that leave the defendant unchanged. So justification *includes* real interior renewal: "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17); "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified" (1 Cor 6:11); Christ was made sin "so that in him we might **become** the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Become, not merely be counted.

Tonight's live discovery gives the group the biblical data that strains the single-instant courtroom picture: Scripture will not confine Abraham's righteousness-by-faith to one instant. Hebrews 11:8 praises the faith of his first obedience (Gen 12), before any reckoning is recorded. Genesis 15:6, quoted in Romans 4, says his belief was "reckoned... as righteousness." And James 2:21 asks, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?", citing Genesis 22, years later on the story's own timeline. If justification were a datable instant, Scripture has given us too many dates. The Catholic reading receives all three: a gratuitous beginning, a living growth, a costly proving. Do not weaponize this against Romans 4; Paul's point there, that Abraham was justified by faith *before and apart from* circumcision and the law's works, is a point the Church happily makes with him.

Keep tonight's steelman on the *nature* of justification (legal fiction versus real transformation). The "faith alone" question gets its own full night next week; if someone fires that gun early, park it visibly for Session 5.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Abraham is the Old Testament root tonight, on Paul's and James's explicit instructions; the discovery section walks his three moments (Gen 12:1-4, Gen 15:1-6, Gen 22:9-14). Two other roots stand behind the Catholic instinct that God's saving verdict transforms. **Psalm 51**: David, guilty and confronted, does not ask the judge for a favorable filing; he asks, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10). The Hebrew verb translated "create" here is the Genesis word, used in Scripture of God's own making. And **Ezekiel 36:26** returns for the third time in four sessions: the promised rescue was never a verdict alone but a transplant, the heart of stone out, the heart of flesh in. Your group has now met that verse often enough to say it with you.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against Heresies, Book IV, ch. 20 (2nd century)

"The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God." (The line is often popularized as "the glory of God is man fully alive.")

A student of St. Polycarp, who knew St. John, St. Irenaeus's sentence, applied to tonight (the application is ours, drawn from his anthropology): God's glory is not in mere verdicts but in creatures made *alive*. What God gets out of justifying you, so to speak, is you, alive with his life and turned to behold him.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 113, a. 9

St. Thomas argues that the justification of the ungodly is, in one respect, a greater work than the creation of heaven and earth: creation's natural good passes away, but the good of grace in a single soul is greater than the natural good of the entire universe, and it endures unto eternal life.

Read that again slowly to the group if you use it: the quiet miracle that happened at your Baptism outweighs, in Thomas's sober judgment, the making of the galaxies. That is what "justified" means.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Leo the Great

Sermon 21, On the Nativity (5th century)

"Christian, recognize your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition."

Preaching on Christmas, St. Leo tells the baptized what they now are, and the Catechism opens its whole section on Christian morality with this very quotation (CCC 1691). Notice the logic of his warning: only a real change can be betrayed. Nobody warns a legal fiction not to go back.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1987. The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us: to cleanse us from our sins and communicate to us "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" and through Baptism.

CCC 1989. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man." The Catechism is quoting the Council of Trent word for word. This is the session's spine.

CCC 1990-1991. Justification detaches from sin and reconciles; it is acceptance of God's righteousness, and with it, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts. The verdict comes with an infusion.

CCC 1992. Justification is merited for us by the Passion of Christ and conferred in Baptism. No prior work of ours merits it, and the adult's free assent is itself grace's gift; everything in the courtroom is real.

CCC 1995. The Holy Spirit is the master of the interior life; justification entails the sanctification of the whole being.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Abraham's three moments (handle with care). The discovery that justification language spans Abraham's decades quietly loads the study's sealed question: a righteousness that lives and grows is a different kind of thing from a verdict in a file. Do **not** say the next sentence out loud in any form: living things can also die. That door opens in Sessions 7 and 8. If a participant says it themselves, keep your face neutral, thank them for reading closely, and park it.

Ezekiel 36, third appearance. Sprinkled water (S2), water and Spirit (S3), and now the new heart as what justification actually confers. Let the group notice the verse is following them. That feeling, that Scripture is one fabric, is a study goal in itself.

"Faith alone" ceasefire. Tonight's fight is legal-fiction-versus-real-change only. If sola fide erupts, write it large on the parking lot list labeled SESSION 5 and promise the objection will get its strongest form next week, from you personally.

Sealed guesses. Still sealed. Four sessions to go; you may enjoy saying only that.

Session Goals

1. The group can define justification as God really making a sinner right with himself, gift first, transformation included.
2. Participants discover the three Abraham moments (Gen 12, 15, 22) and the three New Testament texts that attach faith and justification language to them.
3. The group can state the imputation view fairly and answer it from 2 Cor 5:17, 1 Cor 6:11, and 2 Cor 5:21.
4. Participants connect justification to their own Baptism (CCC 1992) and to the new heart of Ezekiel 36.
5. No one leaves thinking Session 4 revoked Session 2: the gift remains a gift.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes; the Abraham discovery needs unhurried page-turning. Win 10, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Psalm 51 can be one spoken sentence in your summary) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the Abraham sequence or the steelman; they are the night.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, we cannot stand before you on our own record, and you have not asked us to. Thank you for the gift of being set right with you in Christ. Tonight, show us how deep that gift goes: not a new file about us, but a new heart within us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Think of a time someone declared something about you that turned out to change you: a coach naming you a starter, a boss giving you the title, someone saying "I do." What did the declaration actually do?
- When you hear that God "justifies" a person, what have you always assumed that means?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: have someone read Romans 3:21-26 aloud, then Romans 5:1-2. Ask the group to catch every word that tells you what justification costs the one receiving it.

1. According to Romans 3:24, on what basis is a person justified, and what does it cost them? And what does Romans 5:1-2 say the justified person now has?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"They are justified **by his grace as a gift**, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). It costs the receiver nothing, because it cost Christ everything. Paul even says God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:5): the gift arrives before the improvement, exactly as Session 2 taught us to expect.

And the justified person has: "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and "access to this grace **in which we stand**" (Rom 5:1-2). Justification ends the war and opens a standing place. Keep that phrase, "in which we stand"; the study will lean on it later.

2. Read Psalm 51:9-10. David has been caught in the worst sin of his life. Notice what he asks God to do about it. Is he asking for a verdict or for something more?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He asks for the verdict ("blot out all my iniquities") *and* for surgery: "**Create** in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." The Hebrew verb is *bara*, the Genesis word for God's own creating. David already knows what Ezekiel will promise and what the Gospel delivers: David's prayer coheres exactly with what the Church hears in justification: being set right with God arrives as being made new, not merely re-filed.

Someone may hear the echo of Ezekiel 36:26. Good. That verse is following us through this study for a reason.

Live discovery. Say: "Now the Bible's Exhibit A for justification: Abraham. We are going to read three scenes from his life, and then watch the New Testament talk about them. Keep a finger in Genesis." Read, in order, with different readers: Genesis 12:1-4 (the call and the leaving), Genesis 15:1-6 (the stars and the believing), Genesis 22:9-14 (the altar and the offering). Then read Hebrews 11:8, Romans 4:1-3, and James 2:21-23. Ask the group to match each New Testament text to its Genesis scene.

3. Match them: which moment of Abraham's life does each New Testament passage point to, and what does it say about him there?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Hebrews 11:8 points to **Genesis 12**: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out... and he went out, not knowing where he was to go." Faith, at the very first step. Romans 4:1-3 points to **Genesis 15**: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Faith, credited as righteousness, before circumcision and centuries before the law of Moses; that is Paul's whole point in Romans 4. James 2:21-23 points to **Genesis 22**: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?... and the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'"

Notice what James says Genesis 22 did to Genesis 15: it *fulfilled* it. The faith of the stars was completed on the mountain.

4. Here is the puzzle. Genesis 12, Genesis 15, and Genesis 22 are separated by many years, decades in all, on the story's own timeline. If justification were a single, datable courtroom instant, which of these is the instant? What kind of thing must justification be for Scripture to talk this way?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Scripture gives us a real beginning and then refuses to stop there, because it is not describing a filing. It describes a **living relationship of faith**: gratuitously begun (the call he did not request), reckoned righteous in trust (the stars), grown and proven in costly obedience (the altar). Abraham's righteousness has a biography.

This is exactly the Catholic doctrine: an utterly unmerited beginning, a real interior gift, and a life that grows, which the Council of Trent calls the *increase* of justification. Nothing here argues with Romans 4; Paul is proving that the beginning owed nothing to circumcision or the law, and the Church says amen. The full "faith and works" question is next week's whole night. Tonight, just keep the shape: righteousness, in Scripture, is alive.

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength; it is the classical Protestant position, held by serious Christians for five centuries.

A Reformed friend says: "**Justification is forensic: it is God the Judge declaring the believing sinner righteous for Christ's sake alone. Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed, credited, to my account; my sin was credited to his. Romans 4 is accounting language: reckoned, counted. The believer remains in himself a sinner, at once justified and sinful, but the verdict is what saves, and it is unshakable precisely because it rests on Christ's record, not my renovation. You Catholics confuse justification with sanctification, and turn God's verdict into a progress report.**"

5. State what is right in that before you answer it. Then answer it from tonight's texts.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

What is right, and precious: the verdict really is God's to give, it really rests on Christ and not on our performance, and Romans 4 really does use accounting words. Any Catholic answer that loses those truths has lost the Gospel's comfort, and Trent did not lose them: it teaches that nothing before justification, neither faith nor works, *earns* the grace of justification.

But watch what God's declarations do everywhere else in Scripture: "Let there be light," and there was light. God's courtroom is a delivery room. So when Scripture describes the justified, it refuses to stop at the file: "if any one is in Christ, he is a **new creation**" (2 Cor 5:17); "you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11), three verbs, one bath, one event; and the purpose of the great exchange is "so that in him we might **become** the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Become. Not "be regarded as."

And press the friendly question: if the renewal is real, as the best Reformed accounts insist, why must it stand outside the justifying verdict itself? And if anyone does hold the believer unchanged in himself, what was Psalm 51 asking for?

What was Ezekiel 36 promising? Why does St. Leo warn the baptized not to *return* to their former condition? The renewal these texts describe is real, which is precisely Trent's point. The Catholic claim is not that justification is a progress report instead of a verdict; it is that God's verdicts come true. "Not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (CCC 1989, quoting Trent).

DIG DEEPER · What Trent Actually Said

The Council of Trent's Decree on Justification (1547) is one of the most careful documents the Church has ever produced, and it opens where Session 2 opened: adults "are disposed to that justice" only through God's prevenient grace, "without any merits existing on their parts," and it condemns anyone who says a man can be justified before God by his own works without divine grace.

Its most quoted teaching describes what justification confers, in substance: that the justice of God by which he makes us just is poured into the heart, so that justification is not the mere remission of sins but sanctification and renewal of the interior man. Not a rival system to grace; the anatomy of the gift.

SEND · Taking It Out

- You were justified at your Baptism (CCC 1992), almost certainly before you could remember it. Abraham's righteousness had a biography after its beginning. What chapter is yours in right now?
- Where in your life do you still relate to God as a defendant managing a file rather than as a child given a new heart? What would change if you believed the verdict came true?

Live It This Week

Pray Psalm 51. Once this week, pray the whole psalm slowly, and mean verse 10.

Reread the mountain. Read Genesis 22:1-18 on your own, remembering it is the fulfillment of the stars. Ask what God has asked you to trust him with.

Say the sentence. Memorize this and try it on a friend: "Justification is not God calling me something I am not. It is God making me something I was not."

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you justified us freely, by grace, at a font we were carried to. You did not leave us as you found us: you gave the clean heart David begged for. Like Abraham, let our faith have a biography: called, believing, and proven on whatever mountain you choose. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Romans 5:1 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Romans 3:21-26	Opening reading: justified by his grace as a gift (Build Q1)
Romans 5:1-2	Peace with God; grace in which we stand (Build Q1, memory verse)
Romans 4:5	God justifies the ungodly (Q1 answer)
Psalms 51:9-10	Create in me a clean heart (Build Q2)
Genesis 12:1-4	Live discovery, scene 1: the call (Build Q3)
Genesis 15:1-6	Live discovery, scene 2: the stars (Build Q3)
Genesis 22:9-14	Live discovery, scene 3: the altar (Build Q3)
Hebrews 11:8	NT witness to Genesis 12 (Build Q3)
Romans 4:1-3	NT witness to Genesis 15 (Build Q3)
James 2:21-23	NT witness to Genesis 22; "the scripture was fulfilled" (Build Q3)
2 Corinthians 5:17	New creation (steelman answer)
1 Corinthians 6:11	Washed, sanctified, justified (steelman answer)
2 Corinthians 5:21	"Become the righteousness of God" (steelman answer)
Ezekiel 36:26	Thread callback: the new heart (Build Q2 answer)