

Was Abraham Justified by Works?

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...For now I know that thou fearest God....
(Genesis 22:12)



Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references
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And it came to pass after these things, that God did test Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and cut the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spoke unto Abraham, his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh,

as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen. And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD; for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son; That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22:1-18)

Was Abraham Justified by Works?

Our subject lifts out a question that I shall answer immediately, for the answer is obvious and very clear. Scripture says that he was justified by works, and James is the author of the statement:

Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works, when he had offered Isaac, his son, upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God. Ye see, then, that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.
(James 2:21-24)

There are those who insist that we have here a contradiction to the apostle Paul. Did not Paul say that Abraham was justified by faith – not by works? Paul makes a very specific statement in Romans:

For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath something of which to glory, but not before God. (Romans 4:2)

Then over in Galatians 3:6 we read,

Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.

So it would seem that we have here the old argument rising again – are Paul and James in conflict on this point?

Paul vs. James in the Use of Words

May I hasten to state that Paul and James do not conflict at all. They are in entire agreement. As someone has said, “Paul and James do not stand face to face, fighting against each other, but

they stand back to back fighting opposite foes.” The whole problem lies in the fact that they use the same words, but with a different meaning altogether. They are discussing the same subject from different viewpoints. This you will find upon examining the context. Therefore, the confusion rests in a misunderstanding of their use of the three words: *justify*, *faith*, and *works*. If we understand what each means in his use of these three words, we shall find out that Paul and James are not in conflict.

Paul and James View Justification

In the interest of clarity, let us find out what Paul and James really meant when they used these three terms.

The first term to come before us is justified or justification. When Paul uses this term it always means justified in God’s sight. He speaks of how the sinner down here is made right with God. He is never justified by works before God, but he is justified by faith in Jesus Christ. That is the only thing that God accepts. In fact, Paul makes it very clear:

For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath something of which to glory, but not before God. (Romans 4:2)

So we see that when Paul uses the word justification he is thinking of the sinner’s position in connection with and before God.

Now when James uses the term justification he is not thinking of it as being before God at all. Rather, he is thinking of justification before men – how a Christian is justified before men – and he makes that clear:

Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works; show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works. (James 2:18)

In other words, James says, “I am talking here about justification for people who don’t believe it until they see it. I am talking about justification before men.” Then he makes that perfectly clear again, for a little later he writes,

Ye see [not God sees, but ye see], then, that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. (James 2:24)

Therefore, we see that when Paul uses the term justification he is talking about a man’s relationship with God; when James uses the same term, he is talking about a man’s relationship with the world. One is perpendicular, and the other is horizontal.

Paul and James View Faith

The same procedure runs true in their use of the term faith. Again, they mean something different. When Paul talks of faith he is talking about that which is toward God. Paul says that saving faith – a faith that is genuine and real – will transform a person’s life. Paul said of himself,

But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. (Philippians 3:7)

A real revolution took place in his life when he came to Christ. Looking again at Galatians 3:6, we read that “as Abraham believed God...it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And then in Romans:

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (Romans 4:5)

Paul is speaking here of that which we bring to God. The only thing that a sinner can bring to God is faith in Jesus Christ. When James writes about this, he is not talking about faith toward God but about the works of faith. So Paul is talking about the *root* of

faith, and James is talking about the *fruit* of faith, but they are both defending the citadel of faith.

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?

(James 2:14)

James is not talking about the works of the Law. The faith that James is talking about here is *professing faith*, that which is phony and counterfeit. Paul refers to the same idea when he says in 1 Corinthians 15:2, "...unless ye have believed in vain." Paul also wrote, "Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith..." (2 Corinthians 13:5). James simply says that the faith which saves you *will* produce works – works of faith.

One of the greatest dangers for preachers of the gospel is that we like to see people converted, and we are willing to accept a brazen and flippant yes from some individual who says, "Yes, I'll trust Jesus." However, it might be just an impertinent, impudent, and insolent nod of the head; it is so easy today to be as phony as a three-dollar bill. James says, "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2:17). Therefore, even though he uses the word faith, James means *faithfulness* – a faith that makes you faithful before men.

A minister once asked a man who professed conversion, "Have you united with the church?"

"No, I haven't," the man replied. "The dying thief never united with the church, and he went to heaven."

The minister asked, "Have you ever sat at the Lord's table?"

"No, the dying thief never did, and he was accepted," was the man's answer.

The minister asked, "Have you been baptized?"

“No,” he said, “the dying thief was never baptized, and he went to heaven.”

“Have you given to missions?”

“No, the dying thief did not give to missions, and he was not judged for it,” was the reply.

Then this disgusted minister said to the man, “Well, my friend, the difference between you two seems to be that he was a dying thief and you are a living thief.”

Paul and James View Works

When it comes to the word works, surely Paul and James must mean the same thing, do they not? No, they absolutely do not. When Paul speaks of works, he speaks of the works of the Law. I wonder if you have ever noticed that? Will you listen to him,

Therefore, by the deeds [or works] of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20)

So, it is clear that when Paul is talking about works, he is talking about the works of the Law. Then turn to Galatians 2:16 where we read, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law... and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” Here again Paul is talking about the works of the Law.

But James talks about the works of faith. Could he be any more explicit than when he says,

But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith [not the works of the Law, but that which faith produces] without works is dead? (James 2:20)

Therefore, if man's faith does not produce works, that man's faith is dead. Here we find that the two men have two extremely different sources of works in mind. James, that of faith; Paul, that of the Law.

Paul and James Use Abraham to Illustrate

At this point, let's bring the teaching of these two men to bear upon the life of God's great servant, Abraham, in the question of justification, for we find both Paul and James using Abraham as an example. This is of keen interest as we see that Paul lets us look at Abraham when God made His first appearance to him, and James goes to the end of his life when God made His seventh and last appearance to Abraham. Paul goes back to the birth of Isaac and the time when God called Abraham – at which time this man had no works and had very feeble faith, but nonetheless a faith sufficient to move out with God. And when he moved out with God, he was justified by faith. So Paul's example has to do with the early part of Abraham's life. When James presents his argument, we find that he deals with the end of Abraham's life and the offering of Isaac upon the altar. This was the last appearance of God to this man, and James says, in essence, "Now here is the example of what faith has done in this man's life – it has brought him to make the supreme sacrifice."

Look again at James 2:21: "Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works, when he had offered Isaac, his son, upon the altar?" Now in what way does the offering of Isaac reveal the fact that Abraham was justified by works? To see this clearly, we need to notice some very familiar facts. These interesting incidents took place toward the end of the life of Abraham when God called upon him to make the great sacrifice – which was the supreme crisis in his life.

God's Test – Genesis 22

“And it came to pass after these things, that God did test Abraham...” (Genesis 22:1). The King James Version uses the word “tempt,” but the New Scofield Reference Bible changes it to “test.” I know that it’s the same Greek word that you will find for “tempt,” but you will also recall that James says,

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man. (James 1:13)

Now when a man is tempted with evil, it is never God tempting him; it is Satan. God does not tempt men with evil; He tempts them with the good. He tests men in that sense. God’s tests always lead to discipline and development of Christian character and life, while the tests and temptations of Satan always lead to the destruction of the life of the individual. Here we see that Abraham is being tested of God for his own good.

We should pause here to consider a deep truth for God’s children today. Do you know, friends, that for the Christian the greatest testings do not necessarily come at the beginning of our life as a believer? Sometimes God waits until we have had many years along the path, and then He brings a testing into our life so that He might develop us – a testing that we would never have been given at the beginning of our walk with Him. Often these testings cause Christians to say, “Well, I do not see why God has allowed this to happen to me!” My friend, it is evidence of the fact that you are in favor with God. You have come to the place where He can test you. And remember that He will not test you beyond what you are able to bear (see 1 Corinthians 10:13).

Notice that this test did not come at the first part of Abraham’s life. I am very frank to say that I do not believe that Abraham could

have stood this test when God first called him out. At the beginning of his life of faith, he never would have gone this far with God. It was only after several times of lesser testings, then back-sliding, but always returning to his relationship with God that he was put to this ultimate test.

The Supreme Sacrifice

Let us see how God tested him with respect to the dearest thing in his life.

We find that God brought Abraham to the high place of decision – the place of sacrifice. Read the words of Genesis 22:2 – every one of which comes as a sharp stab into the very soul of Abraham: “Take now thy son” – not Ishmael, whom Abraham also loved and had to give up, but Isaac, the son of promise – “thine only son, Isaac.” And in God’s sight, he is the only son because he is the son of promise. Then we reach the climax: “Whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah.” Every statement is charged with tension. God is closing in upon the heart of Abraham and finally asks the supreme sacrifice.

We come now to what is called the problem of the offering of Isaac. Oftentimes the statement is made by Christians that God commanded Abraham to kill Isaac. Well, that is exactly what He did not command. In fact, God commanded Abraham to spare Isaac, that it might be demonstrated to the heathen world around him that God would never require human sacrifice. Will you note: God came to Abraham and said, “I want you to take your son Isaac and ‘offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”

Offering up Isaac was just as much a problem to Abraham as it is to you in attempting to reason your way through it. Had you met him on his way to Mount Moriah, I think you would have

found that he was in a mental fog. Had you asked him if it was true that God had commanded him to take his son and offer him up as a burnt offering, I think that Abraham would have said, “Yes, He has.” And if you’d asked him what he thought of that, being a man of high moral standard, I believe his reply would have been, “Well, you know, I have been surrounded by heathenism all my life, and I have seen human sacrifice. God called me out of heathenism and all its acts, and now for fifty years I have had a firm conviction that human sacrifice is wrong. I got that idea from God. And I do not understand why He has asked me to offer my son; actually, He has asked me to do something that is questionable. He has asked me to make the supreme sacrifice – to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering. I cannot understand this, for He has told me that ‘in Isaac shall thy seed be called’ (Genesis 21:12).” At this point I think that you and I would have asked the question, “Abraham, are you going through with it?” And after a pause his answer would come, “Yes, I am going through with it – because for fifty years I have walked with God, and though I have failed Him many times, He has never failed me once. There is something about all this that I do not understand, but I have learned that I can trust God in anything. I am going to walk with Him by faith.”

Naturally, we would have looked to Abraham for some explanation as to the basis for his thinking. One reason is found when we watch the lad and his father as they reach the top of the mountain. Isaac says, “Well, Dad, here is the altar and the wood; everything is ready, but I don’t see a lamb for the burnt offering.” At this point Abraham replies, “My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering.” But to himself he is doubtless thinking, *I don’t know whether God will let me go through with it or not. He may stop me somewhere along the way, for He has promised that in Isaac my seed shall be called. I am plainly puzzled.* Well, Abraham, suppose He does let you go through with it, will you do it? Abraham’s answer

is, “Yes, I will.” Well, then how in the world will God make good His promise? Again Abraham would probably answer, “You know that has occurred to me.”

Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which also he received him in a figure.

(Hebrews 11:19)

Abraham believed that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead. In other words, Abraham as much as says, “If God lets me go through with it, He will raise Isaac from the dead.” My friends, that is real faith in God. Dare you measure your faith by this?

The Parallel

Moriah was Jerusalem, and the mountain to which they went is a matter of speculation. It has been the belief of some scholars that the mountain on which Abraham offered Isaac was Golgotha – Calvary – where God, years later, offered *His* Son. Notice how this act of Abraham parallels the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. When God told Abraham to offer his “son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest,” God knew that it would not be long until His own Son would go to that very spot to be offered for the sins of the world.

It is a matter of interest to note the parallel further. Isaac was not just a little boy. The use of the word “lad” gives us a wrong impression. In Genesis 22:9 we read:

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

Now how old was Isaac? He was somewhere in his thirties. And how do we know that? Well, the next event that takes place in the life of Abraham is the death of Sarah, his wife, which is recorded

in Genesis 23:1. Sarah was 127 years old when she died, she was 90 years old when Isaac was born, and that means that Isaac was 37 years old when his mother, Sarah, died. I would like to bring in my own thoughts at this point, and they may be accepted for what they are worth. I think that, at the time of his sacrifice, Isaac was 33 years old – the exact age of our Lord when He went to the cross to die.

The Testimony to the World

Abraham is now ready. He lifts the keen blade high to plunge it into the body of his son. It is a dramatic moment. And, as a Christian, please don't criticize Abraham. Rather, ask yourself how far would you go by faith with God today? If you find you cannot measure up to this act of Abraham who was willing to go all the way with God, then do not criticize him. But notice:

The angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

(Genesis 22:11)

In other words, "I am right here where You commanded me to be, Lord."

And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. (Genesis 22:12)

God would not let Abraham go through with it, and do you know why? Because it was wrong. It was wrong because God said it was wrong. Today we get our conception of morals from the Bible, God's Word to us. But the popular reports of the day give us to know that men and women have turned their backs upon the Bible; thus the moral standard is low.

Now God knew all along about the faith of Abraham, but undoubtedly a great number of the Canaanites did not think he was genuine. They had begun to question his faith by saying that this man who avowed perfect faith in God always fled to Egypt or elsewhere in time of famine. However, one day Abraham and Isaac trod the rugged path up Mount Moriah where Abraham lifted high the shining blade – to go all the way with God. But God stopped him and said, “Abraham, I know, and from now on the Canaanites will know, too, that you are willing to walk with Me by faith. They will know when I say that you are justified by faith, that you have a life which backs up My statement.”

Will you read again from James (who considers justification from the viewpoint as before men):

Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works, when he had offered Isaac, his son, upon the altar? (James 2:21)

My friend, from that hour to the present moment, Abraham has borne a testimony to the world that he was a man of faith. And if anyone wants to question his faith, we have but to say he was willing to offer his son upon the altar, and that ends the argument. He had the kind of faith that God said he had.

God's Supreme Sacrifice

Before we leave this incident in the life of Abraham, there is something remarkable that I want you to keep in your thinking; it has to do with the act of offering Isaac upon the altar. Notice the Scripture:

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, behind him a ram caught in a thicket... (Genesis 22:13)

Abraham had just said, “God will provide himself a lamb.” May I say, the ram caught in the thicket was not God’s lamb. Nineteen

hundred years later, John the Baptist pointed his finger at a man who went by and said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.” Then they led Him outside the city of Jerusalem, perhaps to that same Mount Moriah – Calvary. And those who loved Him gathered and said, “He won’t die there; God won’t let Him die.” Scripture says, “God spared not his own Son, but delivered him up freely” (see Romans 8:32). God spared Abraham’s son, but He did not spare His own Son. Abraham said, “I’ll call this place Jehovah-jireh, the Lord will provide” (see Genesis 22:14). What does that mean? The mountain of Jehovah is where God Himself provided a sacrifice by offering His Son and giving Him freely that men might be saved.

Conclusion

Now Abraham did not actually offer his son, but notice what the angel said to him:

The angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD; for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son.... (Genesis 22:15, 16)

God treated it as if he had already completed the act of sacrifice, because God knew the heart of faith of this man. Abraham was justified before God the minute he walked out of Ur of the Chaldees in his weak faith, just believing God. But now he gives a demonstration before a gainsaying and skeptical world that a man of faith is willing to make the supreme sacrifice to Almighty God. Faith was the dynamic of his life that produced an ethic.

A Personal Message for You

There are too many people today who are trying to live the Christian life without God. Friend, you cannot produce the fruits of faith without first having faith. You cannot live the Christian life without a living faith in Jesus Christ. Some will say, "But I have such a weak faith; I am not able to go all the way with God; my life is very unimpressive so far as faith is concerned." God never asks you to have a great faith in the beginning. He asks only that you start with Him by simple faith in Jesus Christ; then He says, "I will bring you to the day when you will walk with Me by faith." The question is, are you willing to put your hand in God's hand and begin to walk with Him?

My neighbor has the most exquisite chrysanthemums, and while I was away this summer my plants died. Suppose I said that I would get busy and produce plants like his, overnight? It has taken all summer to bring his plants to this point. It took watering, weeding, and tending and now there are beautiful flowers. There are a great many folk today who are trying to produce the flowers of faith without ever having planted the seed. You have to start with simple faith; you have to put your faith in Jesus Christ.

God is asking you one thing: Will you start with Him by faith?

Look unto me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else. (Isaiah 45:22)

...Even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him [just looks to Him] should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:14, 15)

The day will come when you will be willing to go all the way with God.

Someone said to Dwight L. Moody, “Do you have grace enough to die for God?” Mr. Moody said, “No, I do not, but when the time comes I think God will give me that kind of grace.” Then came the day when he reached death’s door and that great man of faith said, “Earth is receding; heaven is opening; this is my coronation day.” He had reached the place by faith where he had grace to die.

The trouble is that man will not even begin with God by faith – putting his hand in God’s hand and starting the walk with Him. That is what Abraham did, and God knew he was genuine; the Canaanites knew, everybody knew; and for 4000 years the world has known Abraham was genuine because he was willing to go all the way with God.

Will you begin with Him?