

A SAVING FAITH WORKS

Paul quoted Genesis 15:6 in both Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 to emphasize that justification is by FAITH ALONE. James quotes it in James 2:23 to emphasize that the nature of a saving faith WORKS. Both are true! We are saved by faith ALONE but it must be the right kind of faith that WORKS! We are not saved by works, but rather by faith ALONE, but it must be the right kind of faith. This is the MAJOR point of James 2.

James 2:21–23 (NKJV)

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?

22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?

23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God.

Abraham is the premier example of saving faith in the Bible. Jesus referred to Abraham (cf. John 8); Paul referred to Abraham (cf. Rom. 4; Gal. 3); the writer of Hebrews referred to Abraham as an example of faith at length in Hebrews 11; and here in James 2 James refers to him as well.

James here quotes from Genesis 22 which records the event of Abraham offering up his son Isaac on an altar in obedience to the command of God. But note this took place 30 years after the initial statement of Abraham being justified by faith as recorded in Genesis 15:6.

Genesis 15:6 (NKJV)

6 And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

All Abraham did in Genesis 15 is BELIEVE in the LORD (Gen. 15:6). That’s it.

But now as we track his faith, we see that it worked – which is James’ point. Thirty years later Abraham has not abandoned his faith, rather his faith is still working even to the point that he was willing to offer up Isaac at the command of God. It was clearly a matter of faith that caused him to do this (Heb. 11:17-19).

But note the language in James 2:21. James asks the question: “***Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son***

on the altar?” Grammatically, the expected answer is “Yes, Abraham was thus justified by his works”.

The problem is that Paul in Romans 4:2-3 says that Abraham was NOT justified by works (but rather by faith), but now here in James 2:21 James says Abraham was “justified by works”.

On the face of it that seems like a blatant contradiction. You can’t be justified without works and at the same time be justified by works. Which is it? For this reason, many have sought to pit Paul against James.

In truth they are not in conflict, but rather complement one another. There are two different uses of the word “justify”. Paul uses it one way and James uses it another way.

“Justify” (Gk. – “dikaioo”)

Two senses:

- declared righteous (Paul)
- shown to be right (James)

Paul uses the word “justified” in a forensic or legal sense – that is in the sense of a judge making a legal/formal declaration. At the moment of saving faith the believer is “declared righteous” by the Judge of the universe.

But the word “justified” can also have the meaning of “to be vindicated” or “to be shown to be right” (cf. Lk. 7:29, 35; Rom. 3:4; 1 Tim. 3:16).

Faith ALONE is the basis of justification in the forensic/legal sense; but works are the justification (proof) of that faith in practice.

Did not God know of Abraham’s faith commitment before he proved it in being willing to offer up Isaac? Yes, of course, He knew Abraham’s heart. He had known the reality of his true faith for 30 years.

And yet, God allowed it to be “vindicated” (justified) in practice. If faith is real in the heart, it will play out in life – certainly to some degree.

“Abraham was not a perfect man, either in his faith or in his works. After many years had passed without Sarah’s having the promised heir, he took matters into his own hands, having a son, Ishmael, by Hagar, his wife’s maid. His wavering trust in the Lord led him to commit adultery. That, in turn

led to the creation of the Arab peoples – who, since that time, have been a continuing thorn in the side of the Jews, God’s chosen people through Isaac. In those and other instances, such as his twice lying about Sarah being his sister (Gen. 12:19; 20:2), his works obviously did not justify him before men. But James’ point is that in the overall pattern of his life, Abraham faithfully vindicated his saving faith through his many good works, above all else by offering Isaac.” – **John MacArthur**

Genesis 15 comes first representing initial justifying faith. But then James cites Genesis 22 which comes many years later as proof that a true saving faith will bear fruit in the life. There are many bumps and struggles along the way, but God continues to work in the life of true believers to the end that their faith works – not perfectly – but certainly. Just as sure as faith is real in Gen. 15 so just as sure will be the works as represented in Gen. 22. Forensic justification (Rom. 4:3) is then demonstrated in practical justification (properly understood – James 2:23).

This is rightly dividing the word. Or as the reformers said: ***We are justified by faith but the faith that justifies does not remain alone – it works.*** A true saving faith works -which is James’s point.

Faith in James 2:22 is in the primary position showing that faith comes first. But then a true/living faith works. Note the strong emphasis: Faith was working – that is the point – faith was working together with his works.

The emphasis is strong and clear. Faith works! Thus, the language “***faith was working together with his works***” denotes the close relationship between faith and works. They are distinct and yet closely related in that the one follows the other.

And therefore, his conclusion is that “***by works faith was made perfect***”. The idea of “***perfect***” is “***to be made complete***” or “***to reach the intended goal.***” There is an outworking of faith in the life and that was seen in Abraham’s faith. We are not saved BY good works but FOR good works. That is the intended goal of true faith (cf. Eph. 2:8-10).

The issue throughout James 2 really relates to what constitutes the **NATURE** of a true saving faith. True faith works is James’s point. A living faith is demonstrated in a walk of faith. Faith and works must never be mingled, but neither can they be separated. They must be distinguished but not divorced. When it comes to faith and works – the first produces the second and the second evidences the first.