

FAITH LIKE ABRAHAM

In all the Bible, Abraham is the leading example of saving faith (cf. Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Heb. 11:8-10, 17-19; Ja. 2:23). In the New Testament, Christ, Paul, the writer of Hebrews, and James all build on the FOUNDATIONAL example of Abraham.

a. Christ built on the example of Abraham.

Abraham was justified by faith alone, but it was a living faith that bore fruit in his life, as emphasized by Christ.

John 8:39 (NKJV)

39 They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, **you would do the works** of Abraham. (emphasis mine)

Romans 4:12 (NKJV)

12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but **who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had** while still uncircumcised. (emphasis mine)

Many of the Jews claimed to "believe" in Jesus (Jn. 8:30). Jesus told them true disciples are those who abide in His word (Jn. 8:31). Jesus then proceeded to tell them, "***If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham.***" True saving faith, like that of Abraham, demonstrates itself in doing "the works of Abraham." Abraham had a faith that worked! (cf. Rom. 4:12).

b. Paul built on the example of Abraham.

In both Romans and Galatians (key doctrinal books) Paul went back to the example of Abraham to illustrate the nature of saving faith.

Romans 4:3 (NKJV)

3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Paul appealed to Genesis 15:6 to make his case that justification is by faith alone! When the Bible speaks, that ends the argument! Abraham BELIEVED God, and this is what was accounted to him for righteousness. God accounted his BELIEF to him for righteousness. It was not on the basis of "works" (v. 2) but on the basis of BELIEF (v. 3). Belief is the only thing mentioned! It was BELIEF/FAITH alone!

Those who want to add sacraments, baptism, or any other kind of works to faith contradict the testimony of Abraham. They contradict the Scriptures, which declare clearly that Abraham was accounted righteous on the basis of his faith alone. They contradict Romans 4, which emphatically shows we are accounted righteous on the very SAME BASIS as Abraham. JUST like Abraham, we are saved JUST by FAITH!

In like manner, Paul also appealed to the example of Abraham in Galatians 3.

Galatians 3:6–8 (NKJV)

6 just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

7 Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.

8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”

9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

Once again, in Galatians 3:6, Paul quoted from Genesis 15:6. This was his “go-to” foundational verse in establishing the truth that justification is by faith alone. This same text is quoted by Paul in Romans 4:3 and is also quoted by James in James 2:23.

In Galatians 3:7, when Paul says, “**know**” the sense is be CERTAIN of this, “**that only those who are of faith are the sons of Abraham**”. Those who have faith, just like Abraham – the same kind of faith that he had, are the “*sons of Abraham*”.

There are physical descendants of Abraham, called Jews. And then, there are those who have faith like Abraham, who are said to be the spiritual sons of Abraham. These share a common faith bond with Abraham. It is not enough to be a blood descendant of Abraham. Rather, one must also share in the same faith as Abraham (cf. Matt. 3:9; John 8; Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6).

In Galatians 3:8, Paul quoted from Genesis 12:3, relaying God’s promise to Abram: “In you all the nations shall be blessed”, showing then that this is realized in all those who come to faith in Christ.

The Messiah was a descendant of Abraham (Mt. 1:1), and it is through Him (the Messiah) that all the families of the earth would be blessed. A rough draft of the good news of the gospel was given to Abraham as seen in

Genesis 12:3. But, as it is fleshed out in further revelation, we see that salvation is now made available to all on the basis of faith.

We are saved on the basis of faith that emulates that of Abraham.
We are saved on the basis of faith in the Messiah Who comes through Abraham.

How would God justify the Gentiles? BY FAITH! Is there anything else mentioned here in Galatians 3:8? No! Justification is by faith alone! This is a hill to die on. We are saved by grace alone – what Christ did for us, through faith alone. This is what God revealed to Abraham in draft form way back in Genesis 12:3. This saving faith is exemplified by Abraham as seen in Genesis 15:6.

Galatians 3:9 does not say, “those who are of works”; or “those who are of baptism”; or “those who are of sacraments”. No, it says: “**those who are of faith**” are blessed with believing Abraham. Again, I note that FAITH is the only thing mentioned.

God’s provision of grace is seen in Jesus, but human appropriation is seen in the matter of FAITH.

In context, “**blessed**” in Galatians 3 is the blessing of being counted righteous before God. It is the blessing of being right with God on the basis of faith alone. That was the reality for Abraham, and it is the reality for all believers in Jesus Christ today. Only those who put their trust in Christ alone know the blessing of being right with God on the basis of faith.

c. The writer of Hebrews built on the example of Abraham.

Hebrews 11:8–10 (NKJV)

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise;

10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Abraham had a faith that obeyed. He believed in the promises of God not knowing HOW it would be fulfilled, but believing that it would be. By faith Abraham looked for a specific PLACE. He looked for THE CITY with FOUNDATIONS that are built by God Himself.

Hebrews 11:17–19 (NKJV)

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,

18 of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,”

19 concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Abraham had ups and downs in his walk of faith, but through it all, God continued to mature and grow him in his faith. As an old man, he was TESTED and his obedience demonstrated his faith.

d. James built upon the example of Abraham.

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.

In Genesis 15:6, we have the statement that Abraham simply believed in the LORD, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. But then, years later, in Genesis 22, we see the faith of Abraham being evidenced in works as seen in him being willing to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice in obedience to the command of God.

Both Paul and James use the word “justify” in their statements, but in seemingly contrary ways. Paul emphasizes that Abraham was NOT justified by works (Rom. 4:2-3) while James says Abraham WAS justified by works (Ja. 2:21). The answer to this dilemma is that there are two different uses of the word “justify”. Paul uses it in a different way than James.

Paul used the word “justified” in a legal sense (“declared righteous”). But it can also have the sense of “vindication” or “shown to be right” (cf. Lk. 7:29, 35; Rom. 3:4; 1 Tim. 3:16).

Luke 7:35 (NKJV)

35 But wisdom is justified by all her children.”

What Jesus was saying in Luke 7:35 is that wisdom is shown to be right by its results. James 2 is saying that Abraham’s works showed his faith to be

right – the right kind of faith. Just as wisdom is demonstrated by its results, so also Abraham's faith was demonstrated (or "justified") by his works.

Abraham's works were not meritorious but rather merely vindicated the reality of his living faith. That is the sense in which James uses the word "justified" in James 2:21.

The issue throughout this whole section really relates to what constitutes the NATURE of a true saving faith. James' point is that true faith works. A living faith is demonstrated in a walk of faith as exemplified in the life of Abraham.

Rightly Dividing the Word:

Justification is by faith alone.

Faith produces works.

Works evidence faith.

James finishes his thought that faith is completed in works, by quoting from Genesis 15:6: ***"the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness'".***

Inherent in Abraham's faith in Genesis 15 is the lively reality that the right kind of faith works its way out in the life. The fulfillment of a true living faith is the demonstration of works in the life as noted in Genesis 22.

"Had there been no works, Abraham would not have been justified, but that would have been because the absence of works would mean that he had no real faith." – ***Charles Cranfield***

The emphasis of James is on the NATURE of Abraham's faith. It is shown to be a living/working kind of faith that became evident in his life. We are saved by faith ALONE, but it must be the RIGHT KIND of faith. A true saving faith is of the same NATURE as that which was exercised by Abraham (cf. Rom. 4:22-25).

Those who share in the same kind of faith that Abraham had will likewise walk in "the steps of faith" modeled by Abraham (Rom. 4:12). Such a walk of faith is ultimately God's "workmanship" in the believer's life and redounds to His glory (Eph. 2:10).