

Abraham Was Justified By Faith, No. 2

To some of you, this essay may be like a new revelation! OK, I am being egotistical and audacious. But please read this studiously in spite of your assessment of me. I urge you to read the previous treatise, FR 135, also, for many scripture quotations and some basic thoughts which will not be repeated here. There will be some overlapping.

More of you responded to the former lesson than usual, both giving approval and offering criticism and asking questions. The attitude of honest inquiry is welcomed and respected. In my constricted living circumstances and due to diminishing energy and concentration, it is impossible for me to give studied responses to each of you. So I am using this generalized lesson (and others to follow, if the Lord wills) in an effort to answer various questions that you have raised. Since most formatting is lost in emails, I will use some capitals for visual emphasis, but I am not yelling at you.

Three fearfully misleading assumptions have allowed the compass of interpreters to point off course. Those assumptions are (1) that the PRINCIPLE of justification by faith BEGAN with Abraham, (2) that he was not justified until that point when it was said, "And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6), and (3) that he was justified apart from any action of obedience.

We will point to the beginning and definition the PRINCIPLE OF FAITH. It is translated in the KJV as the LAW OF FAITH in Romans 3:17. A law can be a part of a legal code or a principle or rule of action. Justification is not related to any legal code. Whatever directives God might have given in different ages, justification has always been based upon the principle / law of faith. Let us look again at some very obvious references which are generally overlooked or skirted around.

The Universal Principle of Justification

The one universal principle of justification / righteousness is identified in Hebrews 11. In all ages among all men, right standing with God has depended upon FAITH. In this chapter the OBEDIENCE OF FAITH (Rom. 1:1-6) is stressed as an essential part of the definition of saving faith. It starts with sinful man's first efforts to please God.

In Hebrews 10, expressed in Hebrew imagery, it is urged, "*.. let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering...*" (10:22-13). This faith is more than a past action but must be continuous, "*But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.*" (v. 39). Then stating, "*For by it men of old received divine approval,*" (11:2), attention is directed to how faith worked in the lives of familiar men of old.

*“BY FAITH Abel OFFERED to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, THROUGH WHICH he received APPROVAL AS RIGHTEOUS, God bearing witness by ACCEPTING HIS GIFTS... “ (Heb. 11:4). Wow! Just “outside of Eden,” Abel was approved as righteous / justified by faith, not when he had just believed with conviction, but after his faith had acted in offering an acceptable sacrifice. God bore witness of his completed (“perfected”) faith by accepting his gifts. Cain and his offering were rejected, not because he did not have faith but because of his evil heart (See Gen. 4:4f; 1 John 3:11f; *Free As Sons*, Ch. 4) How could the principle of “obedience of faith” be stated more plainly? So, the principle of justification / righteousness by faith did not begin with Abraham!*

“By FAITH Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death ... Now before he was taken he was attested as having PLEASED GOD.” How had he pleased God? By the PRINCIPLE OF FAITH which included, “Enoch WALKED WITH GOD.” (Heb. 11:5; Gen. 5:24). Another patriarch saved by God’s universal principle.

“By FAITH Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, TOOK HEED AND CONSTRUCTED AN ARK FOR THE SAVING OF HIS HOUSEHOLD; by this he condemned the world and became HEIR OF THE RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH COMES BY FAITH” (Heb. 11:7) The faith of Noah and Enoch was not belief at one point in time, but it was their continuous activating conviction. Obedience was an essential in the very definition of faith. Accepting that definition, we may rightly say that they were saved ONLY BY FAITH, as Luther taught, but not BY FAITH ONLY as is commonly taught today.

From these three examples, it is undeniable that OBEDIENCE OF FAITH, or the principle of JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH was effective from the beginning of the history of mankind. From the beginning, activity was always a part of the essence of faith so that it was ineffective and dead without it.

The heroes of their history are listed in similar manner -- Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Samuel. *“And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (11:39-40). Even their faith which ruled their lives could not save. Faith has no effective power to save any more than anything else we might achieve. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Although they were attested as righteous, the way into heaven had not been opened at the time of the writing of Hebrews. Jesus as High Priest, had taken his sacrifice to open the way into the most holy place and was to soon return to receive all who were justified by his atonement. Their justification was promissory, awaiting the access to the Father through Christ.*

Was the principle of JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH effective in Abraham’s life prior to Genesis 15:6 where it is said, *“He believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as*

righteousness”? Assuredly so. The writer of Hebrews did not jump to that point but he begins years earlier. “By FAITH Abraham OBEYED when he was CALLED TO GO OUT to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance.” “By FAITH he SOJOURNED in the land of promise...” (11:8-9). In the years previous to the record of Genesis 15, he was a BELIEVER and WORSHIPPER following the instruction God had given him. This was covered more fully in FR 135. His case is presented in the same manner as those of Abel, Enoch, and Noah.

The reason so much is made of the case of Abraham is not that his justification was unique, though that is a misguided common assumption. Abraham was pointed to because he was called to be the father of the nation of Israel through whom the promise would be fulfilled. The Jews made two claims of right standing with God. One was because they were children of Abraham. The other was based upon the Law of Moses. Paul labored to convince the Jews that ancestry and the Law offered no claim to the promises, but that they were offered to all who had faith like Abraham, whether Jew or Gentile.

Though it is redundant, I will repeat from my former essay. This is the background for Paul’s writings about Abraham’s faith and of justification by faith in general. Paul dealt with three elements of controversy. (1) The Jews trusted in the covenant made with Abraham, a fleshly covenant of circumcision. (2) They trusted also in righteousness through the covenant of law made with Israel and by keeping the rituals of the Law of Moses. To say Paul was addressing and ruling out works of obedience is to add a confusing element to his discussion. His mission was to bring the Romans to obedience of faith.

In view of the principle of JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH illustrated so clearly in the lives of Abel, Enoch, and Noah, can anyone whose compass is set on truth deny that Abraham was justified before mention was made of it in Genesis 15:1-6? And can intellectual honesty allow us to assert that his justification was previous to works of obedience? The Genesis account called attention to his justification at that point just as in similar manner James called attention to it when Abraham offered Isaac. They were both in agreement about Abraham’s faith and justification but they were not identifying it as something that happened at a certain point in time. Faith involves continuous conviction producing continuous activity. Faith without works is dead, and works without faith are futile. Neither are parts of the principle of justification by faith.

Paul was ruling out justification through the covenant of circumcision and/or works of the Law of Moses. He also ruled out works of achievement deserving of justification. But he did not rule out works of obedience. We must not make Paul contradict himself by asserting that works of obedience are the same as works of merit deserving justification. His mission was “to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5) He declared that Jesus would inflict “vengeance upon those who do not obey the gospel” (2 Thes. 1:8). He also stated, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rom. 1:16). So it is clear that Paul includes obedience in his

definition of saving faith. This is in harmony with the conversion of priests in which “*a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith*” (Acts 6:7).

When Paul told the Ephesian converts, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith*” (Eph. 2:8), he was referring to the principle of faith which, of course, was not of their own devise giving them cause to boast. He was not ruling out obedience of faith, however, in accessing that grace.

In view of the Ephesians being Gentiles, Paul wrote, “*In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory*” (Eph. 1:13). These are the people who were saved by grace through faith. Faith without baptism? Without obedience of faith? No!

Many years before, Paul had gone to Ephesus and found twelve DISCIPLES WHO BELIEVED (Acts 19:1-7). Did Paul say, “Great! You have been saved by faith!”? Although they had all been baptized into John’s baptism, Paul even taught them to be re-baptized. Was he teaching them salvation by works of merit or achievement? Let’s not make Paul contradict himself. Their conversion was consistent with the principles of justification by faith and of obedience of faith, but not consistent with the principle of works, neither works of law nor works of merit nor works of achievement.

Luke recorded the account of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9. Then in Acts 22 and 26 he recorded Paul’s own account of it toward the end of his career. Jesus revealed himself to the persecutor on the road to Damascus. Immediately, he became a believer committing himself to do the will of the Lord, inquiring what Jesus wanted him to do. Following Jesus’ instruction he went into Damascus. For three days and nights he fasted and prayed. The Lord sent Ananias to him to tell him what he must do. Had he not received saving grace in this “saving experience,” his belief and commitment, his penitence, his calling on the Lord in fasting and prayer? No, all his guilt was still upon him. The Spirit-directed evangelist, rather than assuring him of his salvation, urged him, “*And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name*” (22:16).

In recounting this experience toward the end of his life, Paul was reaffirming it rather than discounting it. All of his writings about justification by grace through faith were in harmony. In concluding his discourse on justification through the principle of faith and the obedience of faith, he wrote, “*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand*” (Rom. 5:1-2 NIV).

Please look for more to follow.

(Cecil Hook; September 2002) []

Living faith. "I have been crucified with Christ." "Lest I myself be rejected."

If one is justified by faith before obedience, then all commands and instructions in the Scriptures may be ignored. The only way to lose justification would be by losing faith, and some assume that original justification cannot be forfeited. James, in elaborating on the principle of justification by faith, definitely states that the faith is dead if it is not active, not just hearing the word but in doing the work it demands. So he emphasized that, in that consideration, a person is not justified by faith alone but by works which complete ("perfect") faith. It is commonly asserted that James is referring to the obedience of disciples rather than to justification. Absolutely not so! James asks rhetorically about faith without works, "Can that faith SAVE him?" Then in similar rhetorical manner which demands an affirmative answer, he asks, "Was not Abraham our father JUSTIFIED by WORKS, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that FAITH WAS ACTIVE ALONG WITH HIS WORKS, and faith was COMPLETED by works ... You see that a man is JUSTIFIED BY WORKS AND NOT BY FAITH ALONE."

Was Abraham justified twice, or in two different manners? Was he justified originally by faith before obedience and again later justified by faith that was active as James indicates? Or, was his original justification incomplete? Assuming such untenable positions as consistency would force, subsequent to his original justification by faith without obedience, his faith without obedience would still justify him still precluding his works of obedience. So just cancel out all works of obedience as relating to justification in any manner! And, in doing so, declare James to be uninspired, ignorant, or deceptive because he declared those works to be necessary for JUSTIFICATION!!!

In all this logic and illogic, we must not make Paul contradict himself. His discussion of justification was to teach Jews that Gentiles were included in the promises given through Abraham. So, he introduces his epistle to the Romans with his call "to bring about the OBEDIENCE OF FAITH for the sake of his name among all the NATIONS, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ" (1:1-6). We cannot afford to forget that Paul is setting forth the PRINCIPLE OF FAITH which includes OBEDIENCE OF FAITH as he later uses the simple term of FAITH.

If we ignore that distinction, we will misapply his meaning in Verses 16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to EVERY ONE WHO HAS FAITH, to the JEW first and also to the GREEK. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'HE WHO THROUGH FAITH IS RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE.'"

Relating to baptism

List my FR articles.

Ananias and Paul on Conversion

Luther's teaching -- J W Roberts

Faith only --- or relationships thru baptism.

Points and questions from responses.