

February 27, 2003

## **JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH LIKE ABRAHAM**

From all we know about Abraham, he seems to have been a fine man from the very start. God may have chosen him to be a “father of many nations” due to the excellency of his character.

In spite of all his fine attributes, however, Abraham did some questionable things: When a famine arose over the land of Canaan, he did not stay in the land into which God had led him. Instead, he went down to Egypt. In Egypt, fearing that someone might kill him in order to take his wife, Abraham lied about his relationship with Sarah. Thus, he let Pharaoh to think that she was his sister only, and not his wife.

After Abraham returned to the Land of Canaan, he allowed king Abimelek to think the same thing. In both instances Abraham brought humiliation upon himself and disgrace to his God.

Yet, in spite of these and other failings, God treated Abraham as though he had made no mistakes. The Bible says of him,

“Abram believed the LORD,  
and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

Genesis 15:6 NIV

As a result of this statement, people correctly say that Abraham was “justified” by his faith. The expression “to justify” means to make someone righteous or to consider someone to be righteous. Let us look at Abraham to see if what is said about him will help us understand what “justification by faith” is all about.

It is difficult to know when it was God began crediting righteousness to Abraham. He may have begun doing so at that point in Abraham’s story where Moses tells about it (Genesis 15:6); or Moses may have only made mention of it at that point,

without that actually having been the time when God first credited righteousness to Abraham.

I say this, because not until one reaches chapter twenty-two of Genesis does one read about Abraham's preparing to sacrifice Isaac. And in the book of James, in the New Testament, it says that God considered Abraham to be righteous when he prepared to sacrifice Isaac. James asked,

“Was not our ancestor Abraham  
considered righteous for what he did  
when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?”

James 2:21 NIV

The confusion as to when God began considering Abraham to be righteous can be cleared up, if one realizes that God began treating Abraham as though he were righteous when Abraham first demonstrated his faith. From then on, God led him and spoke to him as though he were a righteous man. It was not until Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac, however, that it could be truthfully said that he had become a righteous man.

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IS NOT PROMINENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In spite of there being relatively little said in the Old Testament about “justification by faith,” much is said there about righteousness in general. Teaching about righteousness (and justice) in the Old Testament centers on two main thoughts. One center is that people should live righteously, and the other is that the descendants of Abraham should keep the Law of Moses.

Let us look more closely at these two thoughts.

## RIGHTEOUS LIVING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Many stories in the Old Testament illustrate the difference between right and wrong. Here are two examples.

Example number one: God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23) because they did not respect God's command regarding which fruit to eat.

Example number two: Before Cain killed his brother, Abel, God warned Cain, saying,

“If you do what is right,  
will you not be accepted?  
But if you do not do what is right,  
sin is crouching at your door;  
it desires to have you,  
but you must master it.”

Genesis 4:7 NIV

Many other examples could be cited to show that the Old Testament differentiates between right and wrong, but these examples will suffice.

Let us turn now to the other main emphasis concerning righteousness in the Old Testament.

## THE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM WERE SUPPOSED TO KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES

God gave a law to the descendants of Abraham. He gave it through Moses. From Moses' time on, righteousness became associated with the law that God gave through Moses. Moses said to the people,

“And if we are careful to obey all this law  
before the LORD our God,  
as he has commanded us,

that will be our righteousness.”

Deuteronomy 6:25 NIV

Although the Law of Moses was a good law for its time and place, it was lacking in one major aspect. It did not (and could not) make people righteous. See Galatians 3:21.

Since the Law of Moses could not justify people, God planned to send the Messiah in order to make justification possible. The prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would justify many people through His personal suffering. Isaiah wrote,

“After the suffering of his soul,  
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge  
my righteous servant will justify many,  
and he will bear their iniquities.”

Isaiah 53:11 NIV

## RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH THE MESSIAH

Jesus saw that the righteousness of many the religious leaders of His day consisted largely of observing ritualistic details of the Law of Moses. This was not what God intended. Jesus said,

“For I tell you  
that unless your righteousness surpasses  
that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law,  
you will certainly not enter the kingdom of  
heaven.”

Matthew 5:20 NIV

Jesus swept away any idea that people could be considered righteous by keeping legalistic and ritualistic requirements of the Law of Moses. He said,

“Woe to you,  
teachers of the law and Pharisees,  
you hypocrites!  
You give a tenth of your spices—  
mint, dill and cummin.  
But you have neglected  
the more important matters of the law—  
justice, mercy and faithfulness.  
You should have practiced the latter,  
without neglecting the former.”

Matthew 23:23 NIV

Those religious leaders sought to attain righteousness without submitting to the righteousness that God was opening up to them through Jesus (Romans 10:3).

They did not realize that the time had come for righteousness to be opened up for every one.

### RIGHTEOUSNESS IS NOT DEPENDENT UPON CIRCUMCISION

Under the old system, only men that were circumcised were considered righteous. That time has passed. The apostle Paul asked, when righteousness was credited to Abraham. He said,

“Under what circumstances was it credited?  
Was it after he was circumcised, or before?  
It was not after, but before!”

Romans 4:10 NIV

The apostle Paul reminded people (Romans 4:11) that circumcision was given to Abraham (Genesis 17:11) as a sign (or seal) of the righteousness that had already been credited to him because of his faith (Genesis 15:6)

## RIGHTEOUSNESS IS NO LONGER DEPENDENT ON KEEPING THE LAW OF MOSES

Abraham lived long before the Law of Moses was given. Therefore, as the apostle Paul pointed out, Abraham was not considered righteous because he kept the Law of Moses. Paul said,

“It was not through law that Abraham  
and his offspring received the promise  
that he would be heir of the world,  
but through the righteousness that comes by faith.”

Romans 4:13 NIV

The apostle Paul also pointed out that if righteousness came by the Law of Moses, there would be no need for Christ to have died (Galatians 2:21).

As it turned out, “Christ is the end of the law.” He has fulfilled the Law of Moses (Matthew 5:17) and taken it out of the way (Colossians 2:14) so that everyone who believes can be justified, not just the descendants of Abraham. The apostle Paul said,

“Christ is the end of the law  
so that there may be righteousness  
for everyone who believes.”

Romans 10:4 NIV

The story of how God imputed righteousness to Abraham was written in the Old Testament not for Abraham’s sake alone (Romans 4:23), but for ours also. The apostle Paul said,

“The words ‘it was credited to him’  
were written not for him alone,  
but also for us,  
to whom God will credit righteousness—

for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

Romans 4:23-25 NIV

## GOD INTENDS FOR PEOPLE TO BECOME TRULY RIGHTEOUS

God is not content with a mere forensic of juridical imputation of righteousness. He wants people to become truly righteous. Just as He worked with Abraham to make him righteous, so He works with us to make us righteous. The apostle Paul asked,

“What shall we say, then?  
Shall we go on sinning  
so that grace may increase?  
By no means!  
We died to sin;  
how can we live in it any longer?”

Romans 6:1-2 NIV

People that have been buried with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:3) have died to sin. They should no longer serve sin (Romans 6:6).

## CAN A PERSON BE JUSTIFIED SIMPLY BY BELIEVING?

Some people have falsely concluded that since people are justified by grace through faith, and not by the works of the Law of Moses, they can be justified without obeying the gospel; but the apostle Paul did not teach such a doctrine. To interpret Paul as teaching justification by faith alone would bring Paul into conflict with himself; for he clearly taught that people should repent of

their sins (Romans 2:4), be immersed in order to get into Christ (Romans 6:3-4), and walk righteously before God (Romans 6:15-20).

## FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

The Book James deals with the question of whether or not faith does a person any good if that person has no works to go with his faith. James said,

“You foolish man,  
do you want evidence  
that faith without deeds is useless ?”

James 2:20 NIV

The fact that Abraham did not have to keep the Law of Moses in order for him to be considered righteous does not mean that Abraham was required to do nothing at all. From the time that God called him until the end of his days, Abraham strove to obey God. The book of James asks,

“Was not our ancestor Abraham  
considered righteous for what he did  
when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?”

James 2:21 NIV

James explained that Abraham’s faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. James said,

“You see that his [Abraham’s] faith  
and his actions were working together,  
and his faith was made complete by what he did.”

James 2:22 NIV



James wanted to make this point very clear, so he said yet again,

“You see that a person is justified  
by what he does and not by faith alone.”

James 2:24 NIV

Finally, James concluded his comments about faith and works by saying,

“As the body without the spirit is dead,  
so faith without deeds is dead.”

James 2:26 NIV

These passages should make it obvious that a disobedient faith will bring no imputation of righteousness. God would not falsify the truth by calling someone righteous, if that person demonstrated by his or her actions that he or she was unrighteous.

A part of what is wrong with the doctrine of righteousness on the basis of faith alone is that it takes the obedience out of righteousness. The doctrine of salvation by faith alone makes it possible for people to think of themselves as righteous without actually being so.

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think that Abraham showed faith from the very start of his walk with God? Please, elaborate on your answer.
2. If Abraham had not added works to his faith, do you think his faith have justified him? Why?
3. Do you think that Abraham grew in his ability to trust God? Please illustrate your answer from Abraham's story.

4. Does observing of the rituals of the Law of Moses make a person righteous? Please explain.
5. Can a person become righteous without being baptized? Please defend your position.
6. Do you think that God expects the people to whom He has imputed righteousness to live righteously? Tell why you think as you do?
7. Do you think a person can live righteously without the help of the Holy Spirit? What can a person do to receive the Holy Spirit? See Acts 2:38-39.