

• *Was not Abraham our father justified by works...?*

James now moves from the negative (barren laziness) to something positive (gaining God's approval in the way we serve Him; the 'fulfilment' of faith). *'And do you want to know, O futile man, that faith without works is useless'*<sup>1</sup>. Faith without works is futile in achieving anything for God, and a man or woman who tries to be an idle believer will be a futile, useless, unfulfilled person! James has a way of proving it and he moves now to something more positive. *'Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar?'*<sup>2</sup>.

1 2:20

2 2:21

**James and Paul – how do their teachings relate to each other?**

How do James' words relate to the teaching of the apostle Paul? His vocabulary seems to be similar to Paul's and yet he is saying something entirely different. Is he publicly disagreeing with Paul? It is possible that James is deliberately emphasizing a different aspect of the gospel, and a different way of using the term 'justify' because Paul's doctrine was dangerous for Christian Jews living in Jerusalem (as one can tell from the second half of the Book of Acts). Perhaps James had to be a bit cautious about Paul for reasons of safety more than for anything doctrinal.

• *Probably not at all – James was writing much earlier*

But it is much more likely that James is not relating to Paul in any way at all. It is quite probable that James was an early document, written before Paul's work had become a norm in the churches. In any case, early Jewish Christians did not take Paul all that seriously at first. Paul was not much understood before the days of Augustine (late 4th, early 5th centuries)! Even the early church fathers (before Augustine) do not seem to have quoted him very much. In the first century only a few people realized that Paul was engaged in the work of preaching the gospel in a way that would last for ever! Even if at the time James wrote his letter he knew Paul's letters (which is improbable) he may not have felt any need to avoid any appearance of contradiction in relation to them.

• *They are writing about different matters and using the word "justify" in different ways about different incidents*

But certain things are clear. Paul's doctrine of justification is the word of God to us. James doctrine of justification is the word of God to us. But they are writing about different matters altogether and using the word 'justify' in different ways. Both approaches are true. Both are indispensable in the life of the church. Apart from using different vocabulary there is not the slightest contradiction between them whatsoever. It is vital that we become familiar with Paul's doctrine of justification. We shall be very weak Christians without it, at best. It is also vital that we listen to James (and Hebrews!) otherwise we shall end up as 'unfulfilled' believers misusing the grace of God to defend our laziness.

• *Paul refers to Genesis 12, whereas James is referring to Genesis 22*

The important thing to notice is that James has in mind two different incidents in the life of Abraham twenty-five years apart. *'Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar?'*<sup>1</sup>. When Paul says we are justified exclusively by faith (for example in Romans 3:28) he is referring to what happened in Genesis 12:1–15:6. James refers to the same point of time in James 2:23 but without using the word 'justify'. But James 2:21 refers to something that happened in Genesis 22.

1 2:21

• *A 25 year time interval*

In verse 21 we must note the time clause: '... when he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar.' And when was that? Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran<sup>1</sup>. Genesis 15:6 is speaking of the faith that Abraham had had for some years although the incident may have taken place a few years later (let us say when Abraham was eighty). In Genesis 17:1 Abraham is ninety-nine years old. Isaac was born when Abraham was about a hundred years old (as Romans 4:19 notes also). The incident of Genesis 22 happens some years later when Isaac is (at a guess) about ten years old. There are about twenty-five years between the events of Genesis 15:6 and the event of Genesis 22. *'Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar?'* – twenty-five years or more after he had been 'justified' in Paul's sense of the term.

1 Genesis  
12:4

James' view of justification has nothing to do with the **initial** receiving of salvation. Considered in itself James 2:23 is identical to Paul's doctrine. 'Abraham believed God and it [his believing] was reckoned to him as righteousness.' James' comments about 'justification' refer to something that happened long after the event of Genesis 15. 'Justification' (in James' sense of the term) 'fulfilled' what had previously taken place.

**Initial faith justified and vindicated**

We must note the great importance of the term 'fulfilled'. Abraham believed God and was 'justified' (in Paul's language) without works. Twenty-five years later he had got to such a high level of godliness that his faith was fulfilled. He had achieved the goal of his life. His initial faith is **fulfilled** in **vindicated** faith – faith that had led to works that God is pleased with. Abraham was 'justified' (in James' language) by works. We may express the matter in columns:

• P	<b>Point A</b>	A time gap of 25 years	<b>Point B</b>
	Genesis 15:6	—————▶	Genesis 22
	Initial faith	—————▶	Tested faith
	A 'reckoned' righteousness	—————▶	An 'achieved' righteousness
	Works uninvolved	—————▶	A supreme test of obedience

• Initially – faith alone – point A

Faith alone was involved at the point mentioned in Genesis 15:6. This led to Abraham's being 'reckoned' righteous. This is precisely Paul's doctrine. What however is a little confusing is that James does not use the term 'justification' for what happens at point A, but for what happens at point B. It must be noted however that James' interpretation of Genesis 15:6 is precisely identical to Paul's. Abraham believed God and **that** – nothing at this point has been mentioned except faith – is reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.



• A gift received passively

When we first trust in Jesus our faith is passive. We do nothing but we receive passively what God is giving us. Ephesians 2:8–9 says we are saved through faith, and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God. It is not the result of works. No one may boast of what he did. We are justified by faith alone.

• Our salvation is secure at the beginning (justification by faith).

But then we come alive unto God. We start doing things for God. There is to be an abundance of works of faith – believing works, working faith – in our lives. Eventually God will approve of us. He will say 'Now I see that you fear Me.' We shall inherit the promises of usefulness and achievement in the kingdom of God. Justification by faith-only leads to justification by works. But the two 'justifications' are different and one might be twenty-five years after the other. However we can begin today, by showing works of mercy to those who need the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our salvation is secure at the beginning (justification by faith). Our reward comes at the end (justification by works).

• Our reward comes at the end (justification by works)

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