

The Justification of Abraham

This subject matter seemingly puts one scripture against another. For instance: Romans 4:2 states, "For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God." Yet, James 2:21 clearly states, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" This contradiction is only apparent, and I purpose to show that these two accounts present different views of the subject, and involve events in the life of Abraham that are years apart.

Anyone reading Romans 4:1-11, not instructed otherwise, would see that the justification of "the ungodly" is in view (4:5). And, in the case of Abraham, this justification was "before God" (4:2), and "without works" (4:4-6), solely upon the basis of "the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised" (4:9-11). This "faith" is contrasted to works (4:5). Likewise, one reading James 2:18-24 should see that the justification was of "Abraham...the friend of God" (2:23), not "the ungodly." Moreover, it was "not before God," but before men, "seest thou...Ye see" (2:22,24), according to the principle of 2:18, "shew me...and I will shew thee." This involves what "faith wrought...by works" (2:22), "works" being the evidence of faith (2:18).

The events of Romans 4 and James 2 involve the same man, but one deals with the salvation of an ungodly, pagan worshipper, the other with the works of a saved man. One involves the establishment of right relationship with God, the other deals with how that relationship is made manifest to others in right conduct. The fact of Abraham's faith was "before God...without works." The evidence of his faith was before others, and by works. In one, faith is, and in the other faith is doing. God alone sees the first in the hearts of men (I Samuel 16:7; Acts 15:8,9). The second is discernible to others (Matthew 5:16; 7:20). By the first, God declares one righteous (Romans 4:5). By the second man declares one righteous (Luke 23:47).

At one time, Abraham was a pagan worshipper (Joshua 24:2,3,14). At that time, Stephen says, "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran (or, Haran), And said...Get thee out of thy country...Then came he out...and dwelt in Charran" (Acts 7:2,3). The historical record traces his movement "from Ur of the Chaldees," and dwelling in "Haran" (Genesis 11:31). Both "Ur" and "Haran" are "in Mesopotamia." Thus, he simply left "Ur," and "came unto Haran, and dwelt there." He stayed there until the death of Terah, his father (11:27,32), and then continued his migration "out of Haran...into the land of Canaan," at the age of "seventy and five years" (12:4,5). The conversation, God to Abraham, recorded in Genesis 12:1-3, took place before that recording. We know this because Chapter 11 closes with Abraham dwelling at Haran (11:31). But, the words of 12:1, "Get thee out of thy country," according to Stephen, were spoken "when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran." Thus, Genesis 12:1 opens with the words, "Now the Lord had said unto Abram."

At the same time, God also "had said unto Abram...in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (12:3). This promise is quoted, and amplified in the Book of Galatians. Galatians 3:6-8 reads: "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness...they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed."

Here, "the scripture" is credited with the ability to foresee and to preach. Yet, there was no scripture as such at the time the words, "in thee shall all nations be blessed," were spoken to Abraham. Those words were written by Moses several centuries after they were actually spoken to Abraham. "The scripture...preached" simply means "God...said," according to Acts 7:2,3. The words "that God would justify," according to scholars, are in the present tense. This accords with the footnote of the A.S.V., "justifieth," and calls attention to the fact that there is only one means of declaring righteous any person in any age. "The heathen" is translated "Gentiles" in 3:14. Genesis 12:3 speaks of "all families," whereas Galatians 3:8 speaks of "all nations." Thus, "the heathen" plus "all nations" would speak of Jew and Gentile alike. "Through faith" is the means of God justifying "the circumcision...and uncircumcision" (Romans 3:30), just as in the case of Abraham (Galatians 3:6,8). In order to this end a specific message must be preached. Hence, "the scripture...preached...the gospel." All scripture does not preach "the gospel," or glad tidings. There are many things in scripture that no one should confuse with a message of "glad tidings" to the ear of the sinner. "The gospel" was preached in connection with the words, "in thee

shall all nations be blessed.” The blessing of this text is salvation, standing related to how “God justifieth.” Compare Acts 3:19,25,26 to Romans 4:6-9.

The expression, “in thee shall all nations be blessed,” stands related to the fact that through Abraham the family line (Matthew 1:1) and the nation (Romans 9:4,5) were founded from which the promised Messiah would come. The seed of Abraham is diversely used in scripture. There is the natural, limited largely to the descendants of Jacob in the twelve tribes of Israel. There is also the spiritual within the natural seed. There is also a spiritual seed who are not natural descendants, namely Gentiles. The latter are heirs of “the promise” made to Abraham related to “all families of the earth.” Compare John 8:37,44; Romans 9:6-8; John 3:6; 1:47; Galatians 3:29. Moreover, the seed of Abraham is plural in places, such as in the words “thy seed...their” (Genesis 17:7,8). But, in 22:17 seed is singular as indicated by the words “thy seed...his.” It is in this singular seed that the promise of Galatians 3:8 is fulfilled, “And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). Thus, “the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise...through faith...to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, and to seeds, as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ” (Galatians 3:14,16).

“The promise” of Galatians 3:8 was made to Abraham “when he was in Mesopotamia before he dwelt in Haran.” Other “promises” were made to Abraham, such as the one related to inheriting “the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:7,8). That promise, however, was made after Abraham entered Canaan (12:5-7; 13:12-15), not “when he was in Mesopotamia before he dwelt in Haran.” The one promise of Galatians 3:8 is singled out because it pertains to the salvation of the sinner whether Jew or Gentile.

What was Abraham’s response to the promise of 3:8? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness” (3:6; Romans 4:3). The singular pronoun “it” in 4:3 cannot have as its antecedent the plural “works” of 4:2. In 4:3, “it was counted to him for righteousness.” But, in 4:9, “faith was reckoned...for righteousness.” Therefore, “it” is “faith,” or the fact of believing. This was “before God” (4:2), “without works” (4:6), being contrasted to works (4:5). Thus, “the promise” and “faith” are often linked together, such as in 4:13,16; Galatians 3:8,14,22. This “promise” preceded the covenant of “the law” given at Sinai by some “four hundred and thirty years” (3:17,18). Therefore, Abraham, who was declared righteous by God before he was “circumcised” (Romans 4:9-11), and before the giving of the law at Sinai, was not justified by either the formal ceremony of circumcision, or obedience to the law. God has only one saving plan, and one means of receiving it, and it is “that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (Galatians 3:22). This accords with the statement “that God justifieth...through faith...saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed” (3:8). This was true in Abraham’s case before the law (Romans 4:2,3,9,13,16; Galatians 3:14,17,18). It was true in David’s day during the very zenith of the law (Romans 4:6-8). And, it is true of “us also” since the law (4:23-25; 5:1,2).

The statement that “faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness” at a time “when he was in uncircumcision” (4:9-11), allows us to establish a time element necessary to distinguish between the truth of 4:2,3,9 and James 2:21,24. According to the historical record, “Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised” (Genesis 17:24). If he was reckoned righteous “in uncircumcision,” and he was 99 years old when circumcised, then he was declared righteous before he was 99. The justification “by works” in James 2:21 involved a specific work that Abraham did after the birth of “Isaac his son.” Again, the historical record discloses that “Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him” (Genesis 21:5). At the time of the event of James 2:21, Isaac was old enough to carry wood up a mountain side, and to interrogate his father about the sacrifice (Genesis 22:6,7). Thus, this event was sometime after Abraham was 100 years old. The point is: What he did sometime after he was 100 cannot be in order to obtain that righteousness which he had before he was 99. It may evidence it, but it cannot be in order to produce it. James deals with “works,” the evidence of faith, according to the principle of James 2:18, “shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.”

The fact of life, in both the physical and spiritual realms, precedes its expression in activity. The evidence of faith is observable to others (Matthew 5:16) when “faith worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6). This principle is true only of those “in Jesus Christ,” and therefore it is in confirmation of a relationship already established between God and those who are “in Jesus Christ.”

Where “the ungodly” are in view, the scriptures read: “To him that worketh not” (Romans 4:5), “without works” (4:6), “no more of works” (11:6), “not of works” (Ephesians 2:8,9), “not according to our works” (II Timothy 1:9), “not by works” (Titus 3:5), etc. Where the children of God are in view, the scriptures make it plain that the spiritual relationship must be established first, and before the responsibilities arising therefrom can be

scripturally assumed. As cases to point, read: Matthew 5:14,16; John 8:39,42; Romans 6:13,18; Galatians 5:6,25; Ephesians 2:10; 5:8; Colossians 2:6; and Hebrews 9:14. The order is always “saved” first, and “good works” following (Ephesians 2:8-10). Thus, “saved...good works” (Titus 3:5,8), or “salvation...good works” (II Timothy 3:15,17). One does not “walk” in order to “live,” but those who “live” are required by God to “walk.” (Galatians 5:25).

One cannot “walk,” as required by God, without “newness of life” (Romans 6:4), and “the love of God...shed abroad in” one’s heart “by the Holy Spirit” (5:5). “Life,” spiritually speaking, is in Christ as a result of believing on Him (I John 5:11,12; John 3:36; 6:47). This “life” is “the gift of God” (Romans 6:23). And, “having believed” one is “sealed with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 1:13, A.S.V.), and that “because ye are sons” (Galatians 4:6). Love, the motivating factor (I Corinthians 13:1-3; II Corinthians 5:14; Galatians 5:6; I John 5:1), obtains in the new life. Lost men are incapable of doing “good works” because they are void of the two essential ingredients, “life” (John 6:53) and “love” (5:42). Therefore, among all lost men, “there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Romans 3:12). In the heart of every saved man there is: faith (Acts 15:8,9; Romans 10:10), Christ (Ephesians 3:17), the Holy Spirit (Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:13), and God’s love (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:6). Conversely, every lost man is an unbeliever (John 3:18,36), without Christ (Ephesians 2:12), without the Holy Spirit (John 14:17; Romans 8:9), and without the love of God (John 5:42; I Corinthians 16:22). Only the former can do “good works,” and only the former are required to in serving the Lord.

Among the lost, “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). The need is to be declared righteous, which only God does “through faith...without works.” He has offered His Son in death – a perfect sacrifice – as payment for the penalty of sin (5:6-8; 6:23). He will do nothing more to save you from sin’s penalty. The work is finished. Trust Christ, and Him alone to save your soul. “And this is the will of him (God, the Father) that sent me (Jesus Christ, the Son of God), that every one which seeth the Son (the bread of life), and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40).

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March, 2002