

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful

Lesson 11: The Friend of God: Faith Made Complete by Obedience --

James 2:21–24; Romans 4:1–5, 16–22; Hebrews 11:8–19

We come now to the lesson that the whole study has been building toward. For ten weeks we have walked beside Abraham through deserts and detours, watched him believe and stumble and obey, and now we step back to ask the question the New Testament itself asks about him: what kind of faith made this man the friend of God? It is no small question, because Abraham is the example the inspired writers reach for again and again when they teach the relationship between faith and works, between grace and obedience. Get Abraham right, and you get the gospel right.

And here is where it gets interesting, because at first glance the New Testament seems to say two opposite things about him. Paul, in Romans 4, insists that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works, that he had nothing to boast about before God, that righteousness was credited to him as a gift, not earned as a wage. But James, in chapter 2, looks at the same Abraham and says, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?” and then states it as plainly as it can be stated: “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” That last phrase, “faith alone,” appears exactly once in all of Scripture, and when it appears, it is denied.

So which is it? Are we saved by faith, or by works? The answer, when we listen carefully to both men, is that they are not fighting; they are guarding the same treasure from two different thieves. Paul is fighting the error that says we can earn our way to God by piling up works of merit and law-keeping, so that God owes us and we can boast. James is fighting the opposite error, the one that says we can have a real, saving faith that just sits there, believing all the right things while never lifting a finger to obey. Paul says you cannot earn it. James says you cannot fake it. And Abraham proves them both.

Because the same Abraham who simply believed God in Genesis 15, and had it counted to him as righteousness, is the Abraham who left Haran not knowing where he was going, and who raised the knife over Isaac on Mount Moriah. His faith was never a bare opinion in his head; it was a living trust that walked, and waited, and obeyed, even when it cost him everything. “Faith was active along with his works,” James says, “and faith was completed by his works.” That is the faith that saves. That is the faith for which Abraham is called the friend of God. And that is the faith God is calling you to this week.

Group Discussion: Paul says Abraham was justified by faith and not by works, while James says he was justified by works and not by faith alone. Many sincere people have been taught that we are saved by “faith only,” yet that is the one phrase Scripture explicitly denies (James 2:24). How

would you begin to explain the way faith and obedience belong together, so that we neither try to earn salvation nor settle for a faith that never obeys?

Personal Reflection: Abraham's faith was never just something he believed; it was something he did, again and again, even when it was costly. Look honestly at your own faith. Where is it alive and active in real obedience, and where has it become more a matter of believing the right things than of actually following God? What is one place your faith needs to start moving?

Read James 2:21–24; Romans 4:1–5, 16–22; Hebrews 11:8–19

Study Questions

1. James writes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works” (James 2:21–22). What does it mean that Abraham's faith was “active along with” and “completed by” his works, and how does this describe the true relationship between genuine faith and obedience?
2. James insists that real faith is a living, working faith. Examine your own: is it mostly a set of beliefs you affirm, or a living trust that actually moves you to obey? In what specific area does your faith most need to stop being merely something you believe and start being something you do?
3. James states it as plainly as possible: “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24), the only place in Scripture the phrase “faith alone” appears, and there it is denied. Reading the surrounding context (James 2:14–19), what kind of faith is James condemning, and why does he say a faith that produces no works is dead, no better than the belief of demons?
4. James says even the demons believe, and shudder (James 2:19), yet that belief saves no one. Are there areas where your “faith” looks more like the demons' belief, affirming truths about God while refusing to obey Him? Where is the gap widest between what you confess and how you actually live?
5. Paul, looking at the same Abraham, insists he was not justified by works, that he had nothing to boast about, and that to the one who works the wage is counted as a debt, but to the one who trusts God, faith is counted as righteousness (Romans 4:1–5). What error is Paul excluding, and why does the gospel leave no room for earning our salvation or putting God in our debt?
6. Paul says there is no boasting before God. Where are you still tempted to think God owes you because of your record, your religious performance, or your good behavior? How does the truth that righteousness is a gift, not a wage, free you from both pride and fear?
7. Paul and James both cite the same verse about Abraham (Genesis 15:6) and reach conclusions that only seem to conflict. How are they actually in harmony, given that Paul excludes works of merit and law-keeping that would earn salvation and allow boasting, while James excludes a dead, workless faith that never obeys? Why is it crucial to see that they use the word “works” in two different senses?

8. It is possible to drift toward either error: toward legalism (trying to earn God's favor) or toward a careless faith that presumes on grace and never truly obeys. Which way do you tend to lean, and what would it look like to hold grace and obedience together as Abraham did, neither earning nor presuming?
9. Putting Paul, James, and Hebrews 11 together, Abraham was justified by grace through a living, obedient faith, never by works of merit and never by a faith that merely believed and did nothing, and Hebrews 11 shows that "by faith" Abraham obeyed, went, waited, and offered his son. How does this combined witness give us the clearest possible refutation of salvation by "faith only," and how does it shape our understanding of the gospel, that we are saved by grace through a faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses Christ, is baptized into Him, and lives faithfully (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26–27; Hebrews 5:9)?
10. Look back across this whole study of Abraham, the friend of God. You have seen a faith that trusted God and obeyed Him, stumbled and got back up, and was completed by works of obedience. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through Abraham's example. What is the single truth about saving faith, the harmony of grace and obedience, or friendship with God that you most need to carry into your life?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 15:6, the verse both Paul and James build upon: Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness; Galatians 5:6, in Christ what counts is faith working through love; Ephesians 2:8–10, saved by grace through faith, not of works, yet created in Christ for good works; Hebrews 5:8–9, Christ became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him; John 15:14, "You are my friends if you do what I command you"