

## Abraham

Abraham is the “*father of many nations,*” the “*father of circumcision,*” and is described as the “*father of all those who believe*” (Romans 4:12, 16, 17) by Paul. All of God’s children, whether under the New Law or the Old Law, look to Abraham as one example of what it takes to be faithful. Even people in our day and time look to Abraham. Despite the overwhelming number of people that look to Abraham as an example, all of those who look to him do not agree as to why they look to him. There are many that look to Abraham as an example of great faith. No one would dispute this fact but many take his example to the next level and use him to promote faith alone. Others look to Abraham as an example of salvation by works. These two groups are constantly at odds with one another. Is one right and the other wrong? Maybe both are right or both are wrong.

In Romans 4, Paul uses Abraham as an example of faith: “*What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness*” (Romans 4:1-5). Paul clearly states that Abraham “*believed and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*” This is a quote from Genesis 15:6. In the book of James, the writer uses this same reference differently: “*But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also*” (James 2:20-26). These two writers seem to be contradicting one another! How can they be quoting the same verse and use it in two different ways?

Like all things in life, to understand the meaning of what is written we must consider the context. In Romans 4, Paul is trying to convince the Jews that they need the Gospel. He has spent two whole chapters, chapters two and three, bringing up evidence of their need for Jesus, and in the fourth chapter he is continuing to prove their need. The Jew would, and still does, hold Abraham in very high regard. He uses his example to show them that he was saved before circumcision and the law. These two things were the hardest parts for the Jew to let go off to become a Christian. In Genesis 15, Abraham was reckoned righteous before he was circumcised. He had not yet become the father of the circumcised, so something else had to have saved him: God’s grace and his faith. Abraham did nothing to earn his righteousness, God gave it to him based on his faith. How did Abraham prove to God that he had such great faith?

This is where James comes in. In the context of James two, James is rebuking all of the hypocrites that claimed to have faith but did not work. He shows their hypocrisy with how they treated the poor and is further showing their lack of faith by turning to the

*“father of all those who believe.”* As the Hebrew writer shows in Hebrews 11, Christians held Abraham in high esteem also and would have look to him as an example. James points out that it wasn't until Abraham was willing to work, that God made him righteous. With out works, it is impossible to prove faith's existence. Abraham's faith in God and His power, is what cause him to offer Isaac. Without faith, he would have refused to kill the son of promise, and without offering Isaac, he would have proven to had a lack of faith.

These two authors are not contradicting one an other. In fact they are proving the same point. Paul proves that without God's grace and our faith we cannot be saved. James proves that it is impossible to have faith in God without showing it in your works. Paul's use of the word “works” is not to be read as “obedience.” The works referred to in Romans is the works of the old law. He takes the first eleven chapters of his letter to the Romans to prove to them that the old law and all of its works, such as circumcision, must be set aside. James is not trying to prove that works alone saves but that faith and works together is what pleases God. Just like our body and our spirit. When the two are together life can exist, but without one or the other only death can exist.