

Does a New Testament faith in Christ agree with the teaching of the Old Testament? What about works, rituals and law?

- I. God Has Always Declared People Righteous Due to Faith not Works 4:1-8
- II. God Has Always Declared People Righteous Due to Faith not Rituals 4:9-12
- III. God Has Always Declared People Righteous Due to Faith not Law 4:13-16
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- I. God Has Always Declared People Righteous Due to Faith not Works 4:1-8

- A. 4:1 *Abraham our forefather according to the flesh has found?* (NASB)
- B. 4:1-4 *If Abraham was justified by works, then he would have reason for boasting. God would owe him something. He could have congratulated himself because he earned a righteous standing before God. But that didn't happen – nor will it ever happen.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV) ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast.

- C. What about James 2:21?

James 2:21 (NKJV) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?

Good question. In order to harmonize these two things we have to consider two things:

- i. The order of events in Genesis.
- ii. The further context of James.

iii. The order of events in Genesis:

Abraham was justified by faith in **Genesis 15:6** when he believed God's promise concerning countless descendants. This was long before Isaac was born. It was something like thirty years later in **Genesis 22** that he was “justified” by works when God had him offer Isaac on the altar (Gen. 22). This act of obedience was the outward demonstration of Abraham's faith. He was justified in the sense that this “work” proved that Abraham's faith was real.

iv. The further context of James:

James 2:21-23 (NKJV) ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? ²²Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? ²³And 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.

The point James is making is that Abraham had to act on his faith at the moment it was tested and this proved that Abraham's faith was real.

- **Application:** Guess What. Your faith is also going to be tested too – and when it is, what you do at those moments is going to reveal how real your faith really is – far more than what you may say you believe right now.

- So Paul and James are completely in harmony; they are simply making different points.
 - James is concerned with **the proper fruit of the Christian life – evidence of our faith**; Paul elsewhere shows he agrees completely.
 - Here, however, Paul is concerned with **how the Christian life begins**.

D. 4:5-8 David's experience was exactly the same as Abraham's: *God imputes righteousness apart from works*.

- i. Remember this: David was guilty of both adultery and murder, yet he confessed his sin and repented of it. In these verses he expresses the sweetness of complete forgiveness.
 - We have a choice: We can try to work our way into God's good favor and fail, or we can admit, like David, that we belong among the ungodly, so that God can justify us.

II. God Has Always Declared People Righteous Due to Faith not Rituals 4:9-12

- A. Circumcision was The Major Issue as far as the Jews of Paul's day were concerned. To be circumcised was to be Jewish and have a claim on the promises of God. God gave this rite to His people as an outward sign of their covenant relationship. To be uncircumcised was to be a Gentile, a non-Jew, and to have no claim on God's promises. In the early church, this was a gigantic cultural barrier. Many Jewish believers found it unthinkable that non-Jews could accept their God, their Bible, and their Messiah, be saved, and yet never submit to circumcision. They saw this as something new and strange – something *just not right!*
- B. Paul shows that faith without circumcision is not something new, just something they never noticed. Abraham was declared righteous by faith **before he was ever circumcised!** He was declared righteous in **Genesis 15** by faith and circumcised at least thirteen years later in **Genesis 17**. Abraham is the father or predecessor of those who believe – whether circumcised or not.
 - **Application:** The relationship between ritual and faith is still important to us. The question most commonly arises in the church pertaining to baptism.
 - Why be baptized? The Lord, for our benefit, has commanded us to baptize disciples (Matt 28:19). Baptism makes the faith in our hearts something outward, tangible or visible. Baptism functions as an outward sign or seal upon the change that has happened within us. It allows us, for the rest of our lives, to look back on that glorious time when we publicly declared that we were no longer *non-believers*, but *new believers*. God commands the ritual, but, as always, He has good reasons to do so.
 - At the same time we have to remember that all outward signs are subject to distortion. They can be misapplied, misunderstood and deteriorate into something they were never intended to be. *Rituals* can easily lead to *ritualism*. Thus we have people whose entire concept of Christianity can be summed up in baptism. Their beliefs are way off the mark doctrinally, their lives contradict every book of the Bible, but they somehow imagine their baptism made them a Christian. Well, it didn't.

III. God Has Always Declared People Righteous Due to Faith not Law 4:13-16

- A. The law was really a wonderful thing in ancient Israel. It gave their whole society a uniquely ethical, God-centered foundation, which set them apart from all other ancient people. But Abraham didn't have the law. It didn't come on the scene until *over 400 years after* Abraham was declared righteous due to his faith.
- B. 4:15 Furthermore, we have the sad problem that *the law results in transgression*. What does that mean? How does that happen?
- i. *Transgression* is related to *sin* but not identical with it. Sin is inherently part of our nature, but sin is a more general term. It cannot be quantified or easily defined apart from the law. Here's an example:
 - We may all agree that it's wrong to drive too fast down a residential street, especially near a school. But how fast is too fast? Now there's no agreement. That's what *sin* is like. Everyone knows it's there, but we disagree as to what it is. So, the city puts up a sign that says "School: Speed Limit 25". We now have a law, so if I go over 25 in that zone we have not simply *sin*, but *transgression*. I have knowingly crossed a line. Rather than make me righteous, the law has more clearly revealed my faults.
 - We can conclude that the law is good, but only for certain purposes. It does what it's supposed to do, which is mostly to help keep me in line. But the law is also weak. It has no power to transform my selfish heart.

Galatians 2:16 (NKJV) knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

IV. The Object of Our Faith Is God Who Raises the Dead 4:17-25

- A. Abraham received a promise that God would make him into a great nation. God further confirmed that promise saying that his descendants would be like the stars of heaven in number. God said this before we read anything about works, rituals or law pertaining to Abraham. And he believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Specific works, rituals and the law all came later.
- B. 4:19 When Isaac was finally born, Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. They could no longer have children by natural means without God's miraculous help. Still, God promised him a son and Abraham believed God's promise.
- C. 4:20 *waver* to be divided in one's own mind. (Robertson)
- D. 4:21 *"Abraham did not know how God would fulfill His word, but that was incidental. He knew God and had every confidence that God **was fully able to do what He had promised**. In one way it was wonderful faith, but in another way it was the most reasonable thing to do, because God's word is the surest thing in the universe, and for Abraham there was no risk in believing it!" (Believer's Bible Commentary)*

E. 4:22 *"God was pleased to find a man who took Him at His word; He always is. And so He credited **righteousness** to Abraham's account. Where once there had been a balance of sin and guilt, now there was nothing but a righteous standing before God. Abraham had been delivered from condemnation and was justified by a holy God through faith."* (Believer's Bible Commentary)

F. 4:23-25 Paul concludes by pointing out that Abraham's story was written so that we might learn from it. If credited righteousness to Abraham's account by faith, then he will do the same for us, if we believe in God who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead.

Conclusions:

- With Abraham as our example, we need to stop relying on what we can do, take God at His word, and continue on in faith from this point on.
- One problem we may have have is that we start out in faith and then, while maintaining our faith *theoretically*, in practice we begin to rely upon works, rituals or a law of our own making. A subtle form of Pharisaical self-reliance is the result. We *know* that we are sinners saved by grace through faith, but we may *think* or *feel as if* we are better than unbelievers – and maybe a little better other Christians too. That's no longer a walk of faith.
- There is also the issue of perseverance. How long are we willing to wait for God's blessing – for Him to fulfill His promises? A year or two? Maybe 5, 10, 15, 20 years? Isaac was born to Abraham 25 years after God first promised Abraham descendants. He had to continue to believe God all that time.
 - Based on this passage, I believe Abraham's faith actually grew stronger throughout those 25 years. Think of it like this:
 - Strong faith in thin ice will never get you across the pond, whereas weak faith in thick ice will. You may start out being very uncertain about that ice, but as you walk, and feel the strength of it under your feet, your confidence will grow.
 - The same is true in our walk of faith. We may start out full of uncertainty, but if we keep on walking and trusting the Lord, we will learn from experience how reliable He is. As a result our faith will grow.
- God has revealed much since the days of Abraham. He exercised his faith hundreds of years before Moses, some 1000 years before David and 2000 years before Christ was born on this earth. We have the benefit of Jesus coming 2000 years ago and all that God has done since Abraham's day. The **content** of our faith is richer, but the **object** of our faith is the same, the God who raised Jesus from the dead and promises to also raise us who trust in Him.