

Faith and Works: A Contextual Study

By Jeremiah White



“You can now judge all the books and decide among them which are best. John’s Gospel and St Paul’s epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St Peter’s first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. ... John’s Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. In a word, St. John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul’s Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore Saint James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw compared to them, for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.” (Martin Luther’s *Preface to the New Testament*)

Let us begin with Abraham, the chief example of faith given in the New Testament, the father of those who believe.

“And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying this shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD: and he counted it to him for righteousness.” (Genesis 15:2-6)

What makes his faith astonishing? Or why would God count him righteous for his belief in this promise? The scriptures bring out that it was his belief in the promise of God despite his great age. His faith in very contrary circumstances.

“Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed unto him for righteousness.” (Romans 4:18-22)

Consider also Zacharias the father of John the Baptist who like Abraham was old and his wife Elizabeth barren. He too was visited by God in the person of the angel Gabriel and promised a child in his old age, but he didn’t believe because he and his wife were old. He was rebuked by the angel for his unbelief and

made dumb until the fulfillment of the promise. So we see it wasn’t an easy thing that anyone would believe.

I would like now to turn to the covenant of circumcision which was given to Abraham after he was declared righteous (Genesis chapter 17). Circumcision is the ritual of removing the foreskin from the male sexual organ. That part of a man’s body is the part most associated with his identity as a male. Hence it symbolizes the cutting away of the fleshly part of his identity as a man. When Abraham believed God’s promise in the face of contrary circumstances it manifested that he had cut away the fleshly part of his inward identity; that he was circumcised in heart (a spiritual man). He was then marked by God in his physical body with outward circumcision as a token of his inward faith. Abraham was justified by this faith, and *not by it’s outward seal-- the work of circumcision*. Abraham was a man circumcised within and without and set apart to be the father of all those would thereafter walk according to his example of faith in God. This is the crux of the faith-works issue. Abraham was declared righteous and justified by his faith (circumcision of his heart), and not by works (physical circumcision), also referred to in other passages as the works of the law. These verses and others are often interpreted to be an issue of faith verses good works, or that faith “alone” is all that is required of a Christian, and that *obedience* to God plays no role.

In Romans 4:9-12 we read:

*“...for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? **When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision?** Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father*

Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. For the promise that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law (outward circumcision), but through the righteousness of faith (inward circumcision)."

God didn't give the blessings to Abraham and his offspring because their foreskins were cut off, but because of the righteousness they exhibit by *being of faith in difficult circumstances*. The term "through the law" can also be referring more broadly to the Mosaic Law which, since it was not given for 430 years, Abraham was obviously declared righteous without it. We also are declared righteous without the Mosaic Law, "if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:24,25).

Paul also writes, "The righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and in the prophets;" (Romans 3:21) The phrase here "without the law" is often taken to mean "without good works" or "without obedience," which is, however, entirely foreign to context. The meaning of Paul's words here is that in the Law and Prophets (the books of the Old Testament), men were declared righteous without the *Law of Moses* and without being *circumcised*—but rather by faith.

Boasting, Glorifying and Confidence in the Flesh

All of the following verses are contextually attached to the word circumcision, or works of the law—not Christian obedience.

Ephesians 2:8,9 "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God, **not of works lest any man should boast.**"

The context here is how one accesses the spirit of grace. We do not get it from ourselves, it is a gift. And we don't access it through works of the law (circumcision) lest any man should boast. If you now read verses 11-16 Paul goes into the tearing down of the middle wall of partition that divided Jews and Gentiles, even the commandments contained in ordinances.

Philippians 3:4,5,9 "Though I might also have **confidence in the flesh**. If any other man thinks he has whereof he might **trust in the flesh**, I more. **Circumcised the eighth day**, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law a Pharisee And be found in him not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

"Not of works lest any man should boast"

Romans 3:30, 4:1-3 "Seeing it is one God who shall justify the **circumcision** by faith, and the **uncircumcision** through faith. What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh [circumcision] has found? For **if Abraham were justified by works (circumcision), he has whereof to glory;** but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." Abraham was declared righteous through faith, and not by the outward seal of circumcision. By faith (*inward* circumcision) and not works (*outward* circumcision).

"Not of works lest any man should boast"

Romans 3:27 "**Where is boasting then? It is excluded.** By what? Law? Of works? Nay: but **by the law of faith.**"

Boasting that you are justified through circumcision is excluded, because it was by faith Abraham was justified, before the work of circumcision.

"Not of works lest any man should boast"

Galatians 3:2-7 "This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law [circumcision] or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the **flesh**? [i.e., circumcision or other works of the law] Have ye suffered so many things in vain? if it be yet in vain. He therefore that ministers to you in the Spirit, and works miracles among you, does he do it by the works **of the law** [because he was circumcised], or by the hearing of faith? Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." In Galatians chapters 2-6 the word circumcision is used in various forms (circumcised, the circumcision, etc.) 16 times. These verses seem to echo Ephesians 2:8,9 where Paul is telling the Ephesians how they were saved from their former conduct by the spirit of grace. And that they accessed that Spirit of grace 1) not of themselves, it was a gift, and 2) not of works (circumcision), lest any man should boast.

"Not of works lest any man should boast."

I think it is worth noting that Peter said of Paul's writings that there were in them, "*some things hard to be understood*" (2 Peter 3:16). Indeed, the meaning of Paul's words in passages such as Romans 3-4, Galatians 2-3 and Ephesians 2 are likely to be misunderstood if we ignore their first century context.

What was this context? The issue Paul opposed so strongly in his epistles was *not* that Christians were *trying to obey Christ* (as if this would be a problem). Rather, the issue was that Jewish Christians were trying to push the Gentile believers to get under the Law of Moses (food ordinances and all) and require them to be circumcised. This was a major concern in the first century, with mixed congregations of Jewish and Gentile believers.

"And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among **us**, that the **Gentiles** by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving **them** the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto **us**; And put no difference between **us and them**, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ **we shall be saved, even as they.**" (Acts 15:7-11)

The Children of Abraham

God wanted Abraham to bring forth a race of children that were like him in that they were of faith in God's promises despite their circumstances (circumcised in heart). And not only this,

but were marked with the seal of that faith in their bodies (physical circumcision).

When Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt they numbered 600,000 males. Just being circumcised in the flesh though did not constitute a son of Abraham. They must all have that faith of Abraham which he exhibited when his faith was tested, when he was yet uncircumcised. So God repeated the test whereby he had tested Abraham. God gave to the children of Israel a promise of a land of milk and honey, then tested them by bringing them into a waste howling wilderness. All their circumstances said that the promise would not be fulfilled; no milk, no honey, no water, no food that they desired. All through their tests in the wilderness they bore the evil fruit of unbelief. When they came to the threshold of inheriting the land, when they arrived at the border, it was to find out that the land was filled with walled cities, and giants. Their unbelief in the promise, by reason of the things they saw bred in them a contempt for God and Moses. Unbelief brought forth sin. And thus having been manifested to not be Abraham's children, but children of the devil, God destroyed them. Only two of the original 600,000, Joshua and Caleb proved to be Abraham's children, and they inherited the promise.

The Law

The purpose of the Law of Moses is best understood if one considers that what God wanted from the beginning was faith which stands up under testing, as in the case of Abraham or Job. This faith in God generates good fruit. "For with the heart man believes unto righteousness..." (Romans 10:10) But, "Little children, let no man deceive you, he that does righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous." (1 John 3:7) Faith doesn't generate virtual righteousness, but real and active righteousness that involves doing what is right.

When the children of Israel flunked test after test in the wilderness, not being of faith in God's promises, God did what any good parent does for a child failing in school. He gave them a tutor to bring them up to the level of being of faith, like Abraham. Moses ascended Mount Sinai and received the tutor. He then descended, his face radiating in a figure as a graduate of the tutor. He was radiating the righteousness of the faith of Abraham his father. This was the purpose of the law. When Moses covered his face with a veil, it symbolized that the Jews wouldn't see the end that the tutor was designed to bring them to, even to exercising Abraham's faith as they were tested in the wilderness. To this day when Moses is read the veil is upon their heart, they have never graduated to exercising Abraham's faith. They live under perpetual tutelage *thinking the law is the end in itself*. When the Jews turn to the Lord in faith the veil is lifted and they see that it brings us to faith in God. Not only this, but we who have this faith are said to declare it with an unveiled face, contrary to what Moses did. This tutor tutored successive generations of Israelites from Moses to Christ, and in each generation there were some graduates.

"Wherefore then serves the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom the promises were made..." (Galatians 3:19) The Mosaic law was an addition to God's plan of bringing forth a race of children that were of faith. It was added because Abraham's offspring were exhibiting the bad fruit of unbelief, having no trust in God. It was in effect until Christ the seed of Abraham came. It

was to tutor the Jews to exhibit Abraham's faith. The tutor was put in place until the time of Christ.

"But we know that the law is good if a man use it lawfully." 1 Timothy 1:7 The lawful use of the law is to bring a man to Abraham's faith. It was given to the sinners and unbelievers in the wilderness. "Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for man slayers, for whose mongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for men stealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine;" (1 Timothy 1:8) The law was made for sinners, not righteous men. To whom was it given? It was given to the thousands of Jews in the wilderness who were failing the tests of their faith.

With Whom Did Abraham Make a Covenant?

"And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of **God in Christ**, the law which was 430 years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect (Galatians 3:17)." God in Christ covenanted with Abraham to be his God and the God of his children after him (Genesis 17:7), namely, those who are of faith. This covenant was made 430 years before the Law of Moses was given. The Law of Moses in no way disannuls this agreement, nor is this agreement established in Abraham's offspring through observance of the Mosaic covenant, but rather through his offspring exhibiting Abraham's faith. The law was an addition to the everlasting covenant made between Christ and Abraham because of the unbelief of Abraham's offspring. If we are of faith Christ is our God and we are counted the children of Abraham

The sin of unbelief

Numbers 13:25-14:39 Please read this account.

We need to believe in him when our faith is tried, lest we fall after the example of the Jews in the wilderness. In Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 we are admonished to be of faith when we are tested. Three parallel thoughts are set forth, 1) God worked 6 days and entered into his rest, 2) The children of Israel went through the wilderness in unbelief and didn't enter the rest God had prepared for them, 3) We are told to labor to be of faith in our trials lest we fail as they did to enter that rest prepared for us. He that enters eternal life has ceased from their works as God did from his. All God's work that he ceased from was good, therefore we see that they who enter eternal life shall have completed the good work of being of faith in their trials, even as Abraham. Christ said to those who asked him, "What can we do that we may work the works of God?" He answered, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he has sent." Here they were being tested again. Believe! Not in a weapon-toting conquering messianic king on a stallion, but in a meek and lowly man who wanted them to conquer their enemies by love.

"Now it was not written for his sake (Abraham) alone, but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification (Romans 4:24,25)." Believe on the Lord, "Trust in him at all times, ye people." (Psalm 62:8)

Not By ***FAITH ALONE***

“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” (James 2:24) Please read verses 2:14-26. Verse 24 is the only verse in scripture that contains the phrase, “faith only.” These verses refer to having actions attached to, and actions consistent with a belief in God, without which our faith is said to be dead, unprofitable, vain, and that cannot save us. These verses speak of faith without action, whereas Paul writes contrasting faith with or without circumcision.