

Justification Illustrated - Abraham, the Justified one.

Paul (or rather Saul) had all his life bragged that he was a descendent of Abraham. This was a source of great pride for all Jews. Take a look at the Jews confronting Jesus.

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"
John 8:33 (NIV).

The whole basis of the apostate Jew's confidence before God was that they were descendants of Abraham. In fact, they had completely factored out the possibility that they could ever be out of favor with God because of the following:¹ [Endnote 1](#)

1. They were descendants of Abraham – Saved because of their race.
2. They were directly associated with either tribe of Judah or Benjamin. By Paul's day the other 10 tribes were intermarried with non-Hebrews and were considered unworthy to be associated with proper temple worship.²
3. They adhered strictly to Hebrew traditions. By the time of Paul's day traditions and obeying pharisaical laws were equivalent to qualification for salvation.

Paul's entire outlook was changed the day he met Jesus Christ so that he could use Abraham as the prototype of Justification by Faith. Before this – his entire outlook was entirely different. We will cover that point when we study Philippians. Let's take a look at Paul's argument and see how his outlook changed.

Abraham was not justified (declared righteous) by his works.

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God. ³ What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Romans 4:1-3 (NIV).

The Jew was very "works" oriented. They thought that good deeds, fulfilling the sayings of the fathers constituted a good standing before God. When they asked Jesus what works they had to do to work the works of God Jesus responded this way:

²⁸ Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? ²⁹ Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the

¹ I'm taking these points directly from John MacArthur's commentary on Philippians 3:5ff

² The split had started originally when the Israelites rebelled against Rehoboam. Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin stayed faithful to Jehovah. The 10 tribes of the north immediately fell into idolatry, were the first to be led off in captivity and never returned to a relationship with Judah and Benjamin. In Paul's day these people populated Samaria.

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work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. John 6:28-29 (KJV).

So for Paul to assert that the works of Abraham did not justify him was quite a leap from his former belief to the present. Paul then takes the Roman believer to the pivotal passage in Genesis.

⁴ **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.** ⁵ **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.** ⁶ **And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.** Genesis 15:4-6 (KJV, my emphasis).

This is key to Christian faith. This is where the Reformation started. The whole idea of justification by the so-called works of man is considered preposterous by God. So when the Pharisee boasted of his good works before God in the temple, Jesus used him as an example of how NOT to be saved (read [Luke 18:9-14](#)). Paul argued intensely for this major point. Listen to him in his letter to the Galatians: **“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”**³ This is how strongly he preached salvation not of works but through faith.⁴

The heart of Paul was completely won over to the Gospel. Thus convinced he could not abide *any* form of salvation by works – and so he brings the most cherished image home to the Jewish mind – Abraham. Surely, in the mind of every Jew, was the assurance that Israel was: **“But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend.”**⁵ Yet in this powerful argument, Paul says that this friendship is not to be assumed. The basis for such a relationship is faith in Jesus Christ – ¹² **This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.** ¹³ **Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.** ¹⁴ **Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.** ¹⁵ **Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.** John 15:12-15 (KJV).

³ Galatians 1:8 (KJV)

⁴ [Ephesians 2:8-9](#).

⁵ Isaiah 41:8 (KJV)

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Abraham Was Justified by His Faith.

³ For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. ⁴ Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. ⁵ But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Romans 4:3-5 (KJV)

This whole idea of justification by faith was foreign to apostate Judaism but not to the Old Testament. Paul, in his introduction, quotes from the prophet Habakkuk: “**Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.**”⁶ Simeon the prophet and Anna the prophetess both gave no allusion to the idea of works but that of Redemption – from Sin – that even the Jew and, of course, the Gentile would receive this Jesus as their Savior – not a matter to be assumed because of race, or works but as both of these Spirit-filled ones as a matter of redemption.

This song of redemption was ringing in the heart of Paul – no more struggling to gain approval of God. No more committing sin in the name of God to fulfill some commandment of the flesh. Paul had discovered the Key – or had the Key pursued him? The Key was to believe in Jesus Christ and he would be saved!⁷

Abraham was such an illustration of this God-kind of righteousness. He was no sinless man after his imputation of righteousness. He agreed to having a mistress in the name of having a son because he had weakened in this faith that JEHOVAH would provide a son. He lied twice saying that his wife was his sister to foreigners so that he might not be killed.⁸ Yet God still considered him righteous because of his abiding faith in Him.

Paul himself did wrestle with this idea of faith resulting in righteousness even though he contended strongly for it – in his heart of hearts he was ashamed of his shortcomings – we’ll cover that in chapter 7 later on.

So the message is clear – faith in Christ results in God imputing Christ’s righteousness into the believer. When God looks at the believer – He sees the righteousness of Christ. This is called “Positional Truth” by some Bible students.

Abraham’s Imputed Righteousness Was the Result of God’s Grace.

¹⁶ Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, (Romans 4:16, KJV).

⁶ Habakkuk 2:4 (KJV)

⁷ [Acts 16:30-31](#)

⁸ [Gen 12:13; 20:2](#)

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Abraham was not just the father of the Jews. No. The promise of Genesis 15 that he was to be the father of countless offspring. This was not a reference to his physical progeny – it was a reference to his spiritual progeny – those who, like Abraham would believe in JEHOVAH (make that Jesus Christ in this day) would be as countless as the stars in the heavens.⁹

This imputed righteousness was not an assumed right on Abrahams part. No. It was the result of God's Grace – His kindly disposition toward Abraham even though he did not deserve this favor, God granted it. So on one hand God granted this undeserved righteousness and on the other hand not only was Abraham to father a son – one from his loins but he was also to father countless others who, like him, would receive this wonderful status of being righteous in the sight of God because of faith in Him.

This is the song of Paul's heart – a Jew who all his life had struggled with this "performance" thing of pleasing God through the burden of keeping the law and keeping the tens of thousands of requirements of the sayings of the fathers.

Salvation Comes from Divine Power Not Human Effort

²³ Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; ²⁴ But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; ²⁵ Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.
(Romans 4:23-25, KJV).

Finally, we look at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was the message of the primitive church of Paul's day. No more struggle to gain favor of God – now the believer sings a new song – that of a believer who has been delivered from sin by the power of God and stands before Him Justified by faith in Him and filled with the Holy Spirit to live a life that is pleasing to Him. This was the new heart of the man Paul – he sang this song without reserve because his heart had been changed forever.

Begin Endnotes

1. MacArthur outlined Phillipians 3:4-6 this way: Salvation is Not by Ritual, Salvation is Not by Race, Salvation is Not by Rank, Salvation is Not by Tradition, Salvation is Not by Religion, Salvation is Not by Sincerity, Salvation is Not by Legalistic Righteousness

⁹ See also [ch 4:18 ff](#)