

The Epistle to the Hebrews
 Lesson # 36 December 29, 2019
 Abraham's Greatest Test of Faith
 Hebrews 11:17-19

Introduction

In this final section of Hebrews 11 that deals with Abraham and his life of faith, we are reminded of his greatest test of faith – an unimaginable test that he passed with flying colours.

When we examine the OT Scripture which is the basis for this 3 verse section in Hebrews, we are observing a major OT type, a graphic reminder that it is to God alone that Abraham, and every believer by extension, owes his complete allegiance, and a story of obedience in the face of stark choice, as Abraham is commanded by God to give up that which is of greatest value to him the key to the fulfillment of all God's promises in the Abrahamic Covenant – his 'only' son, Isaac ('only' in the sense that Isaac was the long-awaited son whom God had promised to him and Sarah, and on the basis of whom the remainder of the promises to Abraham hinged). Richard Phillips' comment here is succinct and appropriate;

"[Isaac] was his 'only son'. This was not strictly true, for Isaac was not the only living son; the point is that he was the one son of promise, the one heir of the covenant. William Lane writes, "When Abraham obeyed God's mandate to leave Ur, he simply gave up his past. But when he was summoned to Mount Moriah to deliver his own son to God, he was asked to surrender his future as well."¹

Only with Isaac alive, could the promises God had made to Abraham and Sarah every be fulfilled. A dead Isaac meant no fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. The record leading up to this Genesis 22 event is extremely clear that only in Isaac – who was really the key to fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant – could the rest of the promises come true. Notice these passages: Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-18; 15:1-21; 17:1-9, 15-21; 21:1-4, 18-21.

Abraham in Paul's Eyes

Romans 4:13-21

In this pertinent passage to support what the author of Hebrews is saying about Abraham, we have Paul using Abraham as an example of what true faith looks like, and here, he contrasts it with the law – notice v. 13. Abraham received the promises of God regarding his future blessings, not by his following of some law given by God, but by simply believing that God could be fully trusted to bring about that which he promised. Verse 14 explains why the heirs of the promises are not "*adherents to the law*", because if it is, then "*faith is null and the promise is void.*" Faith and grace go

¹ Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 472

together, but works and law are not in accordance with grace, and thus, law and the promised inheritance are contradictory.²

James White centers his thoughts on this distinction of faith and grace, when he says this, regarding Romans 4:16;

“The perfect correlation of faith and grace results in the establishment, certitude, and guarantee of the promise to all the descendants. Why? A promise based upon accomplishment in the light of a legal standard cannot be guaranteed! The law places the burden upon the one who is working, while grace places the burden upon the One who graciously justifies! One leads to a man-centered religion, the other to a God-centered one. One leads to a “do this, do this, and hope you make it” plan of salvation, the other to a “God has done this, the promise is sure” Gospel. The promise is true for Jew or Gentile, for all who by grace through faith trust in the promise of God in Jesus Christ.”

Notice verses 17-18. How long can hope sustain us? It sustained Abraham for a lifetime, and especially for all those years when that first step to fulfill the promise, Isaac, had still not arrived. But we have to notice that his hope was not a wish, it was based on the promise of God, and especially take note of v. 17, where it says, “*in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*”! Are we not reminded here of Hebrews 11:19? Biblical hope rests on the certainty of the One who promised it, because a believer has faith, and ‘sees’ that the One who promised is trustworthy, and capable of bringing to pass what we hope for. (cf. Heb. 11:1,6)

In vv. 19-21, Paul closes his thoughts by telling us that Abraham did not weaken in faith, though by all human thinking, what was promised could not possibly come true! Verses 20-21 are very strong on this point. Abraham did not worry that God’s plan would stumble or fail, or that He did not have the power or ability to bring about what He promised. He was fully convinced that God is able to accomplish everything he has planned, and if he has promised it, then it is not just a coincidental occurrence when something hoped for comes to fruition, but a certainty that God is able to do what He said He would do, despite the practical (human) impossibility of it happening.³ So, when we arrive at that point in Abraham’s life when Mt. Moriah looms into view, he is not weaker in faith, but at the apex of the strength of his belief and trust in God!

So, let’s lay out a brief Genesis timeline here, which may be helpful – In Gen. 17:1,24,25, Abraham was 99 years old, and Sarah was 90. Ishmael, whom Sarah’s servant Hagar had borne in Gen. 16:16, and the text tells us that Abraham was 86 (making Sarah 76). Abraham was 75 when called out of Ur (Gen. 12:4), so 11 years had passed. Abraham was 100 when Sarah bore Isaac, and she was 90 (Gen. 21:5), 25 years after Abraham had left Ur. By Genesis 22, Isaac is about 13 years old, based on Gen. 21:20 and the life of Ishmael, who had been removed from Abraham’s household

² James R. White, *The God Who Justifies*, Bethany House, 2001, p. 233

³ Bruce A. ware, *Their God is Too Small*, Crossway, 2003, p.121

with Hagar when he was 13. So, we have – in Genesis 22 – an Isaac who is a young boy, probably at least a teenager, not an infant, as Abraham is confronted by an unthinkable command from God.

So without Isaac remaining alive to have a family of his own, the only ‘nation’ that would come from Abraham’s loins is the nation promised to Ishmael and Hagar in Gen. 16:11-2 – ultimately the seed of Islam. His birth, which created conflict in Abraham’s household has also become the root of the worldwide conflict we see being played out even today and beyond as Ishmael’s descendants attempt to take over the world, especially in hatred against Jews and Christians.

So, 25 years of adventure, hardship and training for Abraham have passed and we now encounter the facts of Genesis 22 and Abraham’s daunting test. Along the path to this momentous event in his life, we notice a few blips in his trust of God. Twice, he told national leaders that Sarah was his sister, so he would not be killed on her account (Gen. 12:10f; 20:1-18), and the fact that he “went in” to Hagar (Gen. 16) to acquire a son rather than wait on God to provide a son through Sarah tells us that he was not perfect, not 100% faithful, although he is often called “the father of our faith.” The 25 years had seasoned him and made him a mature believer, despite his sinful indiscretions. A.W Pink points out;

“God educates His children little by little: as they grow in grace harder tasks are assigned to them, and deeper waters are called upon to be passed through, that enlarged opportunities may be afforded for manifesting their increased faith in God. It is not the raw recruit, but the scarred veteran, who is assigned a place in the front ranks of the battle. Think it not strange then fellow-Christian if thy God is now appointing thee severer tests than He did some years ago.”⁴

Abraham is now ready for the test, having watched Isaac grow for 13-14 years into a young man, strong enough to carry the wood for the planned sacrifice (Gen. 22:6), and wise enough to ask, “What are we sacrificing on this mountain?” (Gen. 22:7).

The Sacrifice of Isaac

Genesis 22:1-19

This passage is spectacular in numerous ways. It is tempting to do a verse by verse exegesis of it, but we are going to just briefly point out some of the more significant points, especially as they relate to Christ’s sacrifice as the antitype of Genesis 22. James, in James 1:2-3 repeats the principle for us of why our faith is ever tested.

Genesis 22:1 is clear that God is, in fact, testing Abraham’s faith. First, God gets Abraham’s attention, then commands him to do something. Verse 2 has a real similarity to Abraham’s call in Genesis 12:1, but here in chapter 22, verse 2, the command is more ominous, because this is the ultimate test of Abraham’s faith. This is not just ‘come out and go where I tell you’, but ‘offer the one that you love⁵, your only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering.’

⁴ A.W. Pink, The Heroes of faith, Mt. Zion Publications, ND, pg. 97

⁵ Notice – verse 2 here is the very first mention of the word, ‘love’ in the Bible.

The first thing I want us to notice is where this sacrifice is to take place – on Mt. Moriah. Turn to II Chronicles 3:1 and I Chronicles 21:24-22:1. Mt. Moriah is the hill that Jerusalem is built on, and in fact, the very place David purchased as the future site of the Temple, exactly where Solomon builds it. II Chronicles 3:1 tells us this is Mt. Moriah! So, we have an immediate indication of the type. Isaac will be sacrificed at the same place that Jesus Christ would later be sacrificed. My own belief, given God’s penchant for precision, is that this is the exact place that would later be named Golgotha & Calvary.

Verses 3 – 4: There is no delay for Abraham, no ‘mulling this over’. He “*rose early in the morning...*” and set out immediately to do what God had commanded him to do. He took 2 young men with him along with Isaac to the place that God directed him to. Facing a task this daunting, most would hesitate, pray and make sure they got the message right – perhaps God would retract the command? But not Abraham. God said it, and he was certain that it was God, so he went. This was not hasty obedience, but the settled and deliberate faithful action of a mature believer.

On the third day, Abraham saw the place in the distance. This “third day” is significant, because for us, as believers in Christ, we are aware of the significance of the 3rd day in relation to Jesus’ resurrection; and we will notice in Hebrews 11:19 that this is exactly what Abraham was thinking of regarding Isaac and this sacrifice. It is interesting that the Genesis account does not supply this detail, but in Abraham’s mind, from that first early morning and for 3 days, Isaac was as good as dead to Abraham. He was not thinking about substitution, but death and resurrection. Notice another interesting point in the Genesis text – at v. 5 to the 2 young men, “I and the boy will go over there and worship, and come again to you.” (i.e., both of us)

But, there never having been any recorded resurrection prior to Genesis 22, what had Abraham considering it now? He had no written Scripture to consult, but he knew God and had trusted Him for about 37 or 38 years by that time, and recalled all that God had done for him, and what He had promised to him. He recognised that for what God had promised for the future to come to fruition, Isaac had to remain alive! (cf. Gen. 17:17-18). Even the circumstances of Isaac’s birth to a 90 year old Sarah was proof that God delivered on His promise, and quite obviously controlled life itself. So, if God has power over life, then He also has power over death!

Ultimately, what this means is that Abraham trusted God completely. Philip Hughes points out:

“Because he enjoyed a proper relationship with God Abraham knew that God is altogether holy and just and loving and that he cannot be untrue to himself; and he realized that it was not for him, a sinful creature, to query the word of his infinite Creator...This trial, in fact, so far from shaking Abraham’s faith, actually served to establish it, for through it the unchangeable nature of

God's purpose and the impossibility that God should prove false to his promise became more than ever the great motivating realities to him."⁶

This does not mean this was easy for Abraham! – vv. 6-7 – Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice, reminiscent of Jesus carrying His own cross beam in JN 19:17. Abraham carried the knife and the fire, as the two of them, father & son, climbed up to the place designated by God. Here, as mentioned earlier, is an indicator that Isaac was no infant or toddler. He was strong enough to carry the wood – likely a significant weight – and was smart enough to realize that there was wood, plus the knife, but no sacrifice.

Then, v. 18 interjects an amazing statement of reply by Abraham, “*God will provide for himself the lamb...*”. We need to pause and reflect on this for a moment. It is important both for the narrative here in Genesis 22, as well as for the type that is being laid down.

First of all, we must consider that the prominent person in this account is not Isaac, it is Abraham, the father. “Isaac is shown very simply (& sweetly) obeying his father's will. It is the affections of the father's heart that are here displayed most conspicuously.”⁷ That lines up well with what we read of Christ's sacrifice in Acts 2:23 & 4:28; in Romans 8:32, and in I Peter 3:18. (and of course, verses like John 10:15; 12:27, MK 14:36)

Abraham's answer to his son is evidence of his full trust in God, and nothing less. To Abraham's thinking, God will provide either a resurrection of Isaac or (and this is speculative, because neither Genesis nor Hebrews says Abraham considered this) provide a substitute. Perhaps considering his answer to Isaac in v. 18? Of course, that is exactly what God does as we will see, but it is doubtful and uncertain that this really crossed Abraham's mind; but he is certain that, one way or another, after a sacrifice, he and the boy would return to the young men at the base of the mountain, as he had told them in v. 5. They were left there, because this transaction that was about to take place, this worship, was between father and son only, just as at Calvary and the sudden deep darkness that overtook the scene.

But notice the full impact of Abraham's statement in v. 8 – “God will provide for Himself the lamb...”. First and foremost, especially considering Romans 3:21-26, the sacrifice of Christ – the antitype of this narrative – was for God, to display His righteousness, so the initial benefit was to glorify God, and the magnificent benefit for us was the grace bought for us in salvation. Twice we are told in this passage in Romans that “*This was to show [demonstrate] His [God's] righteousness.*” Why? “*So that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*”(v. 26).

The worship that Abraham was about to engage in (and actually, his 3 day journey was part of that worship) was to magnify and glorify God, the One who had

⁶ Philip Hughes, as cited by Richard Phillips, p. 476

⁷ A.W Pink, Gleanings in Genesis, Moody, 1922/1976 reprint, Moody, pg. 222

commanded him to do it. Notice something Jesus says about His impending sacrifice (at least the part Judas is involved in). See JN 13:27-32. And to add to this, we must consider Jesus in Gethsemane – Matt. 26:42,53-56. For whose benefit is Jesus laying down His life? Certainly, it is to save sinners – there can be no question about that, but primarily, it's to glorify God, the Father, who had sent Him and had promised forgiveness as a result of Jesus' actions on Calvary. These verses are also pertinent: I Pet. 1:20-21; I Cor. 8:19b; Eph. 3:11-12.

VV. 9-10 – In the very act of carrying out what he had to do, as Abraham binds Isaac and lays him on the wood on the altar, and is ready to plunge the knife into his son, then vv. 11-12 tell us that “the angel of the Lord” calls to him from heaven (does not appear to him apparently) and stops him. Verse 12 is critical here and the one that brings our thoughts to an impasse as well. Note the words, “*Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.*” Here's the question – Didn't God, who knows everything, know that Abraham was this faithful, even without this test? Because of this question, this is a challenging verse, and as you might imagine, the critics such as Open Theists and Process Theologians seize on it to make God out to be less than omniscient.

Bruce Ware has as good an explanation for this statement as any others I have seen, in response to Open Theists who claim that God cannot know the future, so this statement proves that He did not know Abraham would go through with it: “Clearly this text (and all others cited in support of the openness view) has an intended meaning. It simply will not do to say, in response to the openness proposal, that when Genesis 22:12 says, “for now I know” it means “for I have eternally known.” Openness advocates are right to point to something that takes place in relation to God when Abraham lifts his knife. But if this statement cannot refer to a literal acquiring of knowledge that Abraham fears God – knowledge of which God was ignorant until Abraham raised the knife to kill Isaac – what can this statement mean?

I have argued elsewhere [in a journal essay] that the divine immutability is best understood as involving God's unchangeable nature (ontological immutability), but that Scripture does not lead us to think of God as unchangeable in every respect (absolute immutability). Importantly, God is changeable in relation with his creation, particularly with human and angelic moral creatures he has made to live in relationship with him. In this relational mutability, God does not change in his essential nature, purposes, will, knowledge, or wisdom; but he does interact with his people in the experiences of their lives as these unfold in time. God actually enters into relationship with his people, while knowing from eternity all that they will face...When the angel of the LORD utters the statement, “for now I know you fear God,” this expresses the idea that “in the experience of this action I [God] am witnessing Abraham demonstrate dramatically and afresh that he fears me, and I find this both pleasing and acceptable in my sight...God has witnessed and experienced in this moment what He had always known, and it is this that is being communicated by the phrase, “for now I know.”⁸

From our knowledge of the Bible in its entirety, we know that God is in fact, omniscient – that he knows all from beginning to end, so this verse is not saying that

⁸ Bruce A. Ware; *God's Lesser Glory*, Crossway, 2000, pp. 73-74

God just now learned the extent of Abraham's faith! Instead, it is also that Abraham who has just been graciously granted to see into the depths of his own heart and to see the extent of his trust in God, and his faithfulness is rewarded as it is not resurrection that is happening, but substitutionary atonement – v. 13. The type for Christ's sacrifice is thus established, although in Christ's case, the beloved Son is not spared, there is no substitute for the substitute, and resurrection is necessary, and was planned in the eternity past councils of the Godhead – cf. Eph. 1:11; I Pet. 1:20; II Tim. 1:9 and Titus 1:2.

So, providentially, a ram is caught in a nearby thicket, and Abraham substitutes the ram for Isaac, and completes the burnt offering ritual. And Abraham now echoes what he had told Isaac in v. 8 – see v. 14. This 'mount of the Lord' is Moriah / Jerusalem, and this certainly points forward to Calvary, the true Mount of the Lord, where salvation was provided.

vv. 15-19 – This 'angel of the lord' (the evidence is inconclusive, but this is quite likely the pre-incarnate Christ) now calls out to Abraham a second time from heaven, and v. 16 is interesting as it partially parallels v. 12 above, but adds a second element and a repeated promise of the facets of the Abrahamic Covenant in part, in vv. 17-18 (cf. Gen. 12:2 and 17:2-9,29-21). The author of Hebrews cites part of this passage in Heb. 6:13-14, and notice how he points out the key aspect of what the angel of the Lord says – *“By myself I have sworn...”*, and identifies the speaker as God, reminding us that *“He had no one greater by which to swear...”*, which is one reason I suspect this angel of the Lord may be the pre-incarnate Christ, God Himself. The promise, which was always going to be fulfilled because it was God's unconditional promise, is now “etched in steel”. Heb. 6:15 tells us, *“And thus, Abraham, having patiently waited, attained the promise.”* Read down in Heb. 6:15-20.

Then, finally, return to Genesis 22:19. One more interesting point. Remember Gen. 22:5, and my comments? Well, here, in this text, only Abraham returns to the 2 young men. We know that Isaac was not sacrificed, and must have surely returned with his father down the mountain, but, perhaps to protect the type (only God knows) our text leaves Isaac on the mountain! A.W. Pink sees this as a type of the ascension of Christ. Ida Habershon [“The Study of the Types”] points out that we don't read Isaac's name again from Gen. 22:12 until Gen. 24 when Abraham (Isaac's father) sends out his trusted, unnamed servant to search out a wife for Isaac (the son). Is this another type? Or perhaps a continuation of the type in Genesis 22? This time of the bride of Christ, and the unnamed servant is us, according to Matthew 28's Great Commission.

The Hebrews Commentary

Hebrews 11:17-19

“The proof of love is always found in the willingness to sacrifice. God tested Abraham not merely by asking for a sacrifice, or even a great sacrifice, but the sacrifice of that which Abraham held most dear: his covenant heir, Isaac. The test of our Christian devotion always involves this, that we love not so much the gifts – great as they are – but the giver Himself above all. The question is always whether we are willing to make God first – indeed, whether we are willing to make him

everything. John Owen writes; “God says to us, ‘My son, give me your heart’ (Prov. 23:26). And God commands us to love him with all our heart, soul, strength and mind (Luke 10:27). This is the response God wants from us in return for his love to us...This is love, that God loves us first, and then we love him in response to his love.”

We might wonder if God has the right to demand such singular devotion. The answer is a resounding “yes!”. Arthur Pink explains, “The Lord has an absolute claim upon us, upon all that we have. As our Maker and Sovereign He has the right to demand from us anything He pleases, and whatsoever he requires we must yield. All that we have comes from Him, and must be held for Him, and at His disposal...The bounty of God should encourage us to surrender freely whatever He calls for, for none ever lose by giving up anything to God.”⁹

Now that we’ve looked at the Genesis account that these 3 Hebrews verses celebrate, there seems to be no question about what true faith looks like, and how God responds to it. And of course, obviously, the application for us is not to “hear God’s voice” talking to us to send us on a mission of killing a child. In fact, some people are disturbed by that aspect of this account, as Richard Phillips points out; “Occasionally, I find myself talking with someone who is disturbed about a subject like this test of Abraham’s faith, or God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus, or the Bible’s teaching on the eternal punishment of sinners in hell. Inevitably, from the person’s perspective, what God is doing is a terrible thing. How can a good God do something that is so wrong? From the perspective of their humanism, people with these questions [How can a good God do something that is so wrong?] are never going to receive an acceptable answer. Humanism is the belief, so ingrained in us all, that what is best for the greatest number of humans is ultimately the yardstick of all good. But God is not a humanist; he is a theist! God does not think that the greatest good for man is the greatest good. He thinks that the glory of his own name is paramount. He thinks that the manifestation of his justice and his holiness and, yes, his love is worth more than all the stars in the sky...”¹⁰

I don’t think we can overestimate the importance of this passage in Genesis, and the recounting of it in Hebrews 11. There is one other point I am convinced we need to take a look at, but it is found not in Hebrews 11 or even in Genesis 22, but in James 2:20-24.

Was Abraham Justified by Faith in Genesis 22 or in Genesis 15:6?

There is virtually complete agreement by most conservative theologians that Romans 4: 1-3 citing Genesis 15:6 in v. 4, is describing the point at which God’s grace of declaring Abraham justified came into his life. However, we just read James 2:21-23, and it seems to be saying something different, so what’s the deal? Before we look into that further, notice again what James says in 2:23-24; “*and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’ – and*

⁹ Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 470-471

¹⁰ IBID, p. 474

he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

How can this dilemma be solved?

This following section is taken from my James Lesson # 9 which covered this question. I taught this lesson in November, 2014. I have lightly edited this section of the lesson, and this comprises one section from it, which deals with this issue specifically.

It is in these 5 verses that many theologians claim that James contradicts Paul regarding justification by grace through faith. It was these verses that led Martin Luther to claim that James is “a right strawy epistle.” This makes it extremely important that we understand what James is saying here, and what he is not saying. I hope to convince you that what James is saying is not only not contradictory to Paul, but actually complements him.

In Paul’s extant writing, Romans is the book where he most succinctly provides theological evidence for justification by grace through faith (especially Rom. 3:21-26), as well as in Rom. 4 where Paul puts forth Abraham as an OT example of this, but to say that James is responding to Paul and Romans is chronologically impossible. James wrote this epistle in the 40’s, and Romans was not written until about 57 AD. Not only that, but to say that James is wrong on this point impugns the Holy Spirit, the real author of Scripture, as writing contradictory doctrine.

James R. White rightly says,

“The subject in Romans is the grand work of God in Christ whereby He makes men right with Himself, establishing peace through justification by faith. James is writing to Christians about how they are to live their lives as believers. One involves a focus upon what God has done in Christ, the other upon what our response should be in light of that work. One is written to Christians about the gospel, the other is written to Christians about how they are to live having embraced that gospel.”¹¹

Aside from the seemingly contradictory selection of 2 different passages describing Abraham’s conversion, here is a comparison of the two key verses of the controversy:

James 2:24: “...a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Romans 3:28: “...one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

James White says, “We have already seen that James is arguing against a use of the word faith (a deedless, dead, empty, useless faith that exists only in the realm of words and not action) that is not paralleled in the Pauline passages that speak of how one is justified...Paul speaks of justification “before God” in Gal. 3:11, or “in His sight” (Romans 3:20), while the context of James is “show me”. The assertion that the verbal parallels override the immediate contexts must be rejected, for it has no basis. James’s use must be allowed to stand on its own.”¹²

¹¹ James R. White, Scripture Alone, Bethany House, 2001, p. 166-167

¹² James R. White, The God Who Justifies, Bethany House, 2001, p. 343

We cannot divorce these 5 verses from the remainder of James's context from 2:1 and following. Again, James White points out, "What is vital to note is that the nature of the polemic does not change, either: James is still exhorting Christians to live in light of their profession of faith "in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1). This is vital, for the context of 2:14-26 must be fully integrated into the exegesis. The meaning of such terms as "faith", "works", and "justify" cannot be ascertained outside of the context in which James uses them. James 2:14 forms a single argument: verse 26 could be quoted immediately after verse 14 and the meaning would remain intact...While true faith is noted (by contrast) in the section, the point is the same all the way through: deedless faith is not saving faith."¹³ (emphasis is mine)

Because Abraham is a central personality in the national existence of Israel, and James and most of the converts he wrote to were originally Jews, it is highly relevant to bring him into the argument (just as Paul does in Romans 4). James is not using Abraham as a counter-argument against Paul's yet-to-be written position but because Abraham is relevant to the people he is writing to.

Whereas Paul, in keeping with the context of his point regarding how Abraham was justified (born again, saved by grace through faith), in Rom. 4:1-25 he provides a lengthy argument supporting what he had said in Rom. 3:21ff. James, on the other hand is not concerned as much with how Abraham began his life of faith, but by how certain things he did proved or verified that his faith was real. What was the strongest evidence James could muster to show this? James White explains this aspect of the debate well regarding Genesis 22;

"Even God's own words point to this *demonstration* of faith in the act of obedience, for surely what else could God mean when He says, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing against him; for *now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (Genesis 22:12 NASB) than that Abraham was *given evidence* of the faith he possessed decades earlier in Genesis 15:6? Surely God knew of the reality of the faith that was Abraham's when He declared Abraham righteous. But it is the *demonstration* of that faith in Abraham's *actions* that draws James's attention. As Johnson observes, "James sees the offering of Isaac as the *demonstration* of this faith rather than its replacement." This is exactly the point that is brought out clearly in verses 22-23 with the citation of Genesis 15:6 and the discussion of the perfection of faith."¹⁴ (emphasis in original)

This is precisely why James selects this passage from the OT, so that his readers would be very familiar with it, and it expresses his point perfectly. Where did Abraham's faith go to be exercised? See Hebrews 11:17-19. Here is how his faith worked – he actually considered this in his mind; "God wants me to sacrifice Isaac, the very son I waited decades for, the one He promised would be the beginning of a great multitude of descendants (Gen. 15:1-21), the son of promise. So, if God wants me to do this, which humanly would make the fulfillment of God's promise impossible, then, assuming I go through with it, God must plan to resurrect Isaac from the dead!" that is incidentally, something that had never happened yet in Abraham's time or before. But Abraham's faith in God was so strong that he believed that God had that sort of power, and that was the way Abraham presumed that God would keep His promise. If Isaac died, and was not resurrected, what would that say about God's promises &

¹³ IBID, p. 331

¹⁴ IBID, p. 347

power? So Abraham chose to trust God even when trusting God seemed very risky, potentially painful, and outside of the realm of the normal possibility of any good coming from it.

Verses 22-23 – James now adds that his readers should see that “*faith was active*”, that “his faith was completed by his works.” James wants his readers to see that there is a tight relationship that exists between faith and the works which flow out from that faith. The idea that saving faith could even exist without fruit or deeds is what James is denying. Abraham could not be seen as a man of faith if there was nothing he ever exhibited to show what he had faith in! It is simply not possible that James thought Abraham had no works of faith between Genesis 15 & Genesis 22, but the episode of his life in Genesis 22 was such a huge and unique indicator of faith that it stands head and shoulders over any other event in Abraham’s life. Again, James White makes an excellent point here:

“Abraham’s offering of Isaac did not change the nature of his faith relationship with God: it showed that relationship, begun decades earlier, was real, living, vital and demonstrable. The perfection of the faith by the deeds did not change the faith, but showed that it was real faith, not just said, but actual, a matter of the heart, not just the mind.”¹⁵

Although this (v. 23) is a quote of Genesis 15:6, which is when Abraham was ‘saved’, or “justified” years later, at Mt. Moriah, the reality of the faith Abraham had possessed since Genesis 15:6 was unquestionably demonstrated by his obedience in offering up Isaac – something he would have carried out had the angel of the Lord not stayed his hand in Gen. 22:11-12. The Scripture was fulfilled in this act of obedience not by an addition of something, an action by Abraham as a means of justification, but by the demonstration that Abraham had really believed back in Gen. 15:6.

Perhaps a parallel concept might be helpful here. Look at Rom. 3:26. There is no question about God’s justice and righteousness before the Cross. Yet, Paul here talks about the cross being a demonstration (show) of His righteousness. Why was it in question? Because God had ‘passed over’ OT sins – people were saved on credit in a sense. They were not sent to Hell at death because their redemption was a surety (to them) yet future. Once Jesus died, God’s saving people by faith was revealed as just, and He could now be the justifier of those with that faith in Christ before He was ever “on earth” with His people in the flesh or gave His life as a ransom. In a similar way, Abraham’s faith existed, but the Genesis 22 demonstration revealed how real it really was and sealed his justification in that sense.

James adds, and this is not a quote from the OT, “*and he was called a friend of God.*” This may simply reflect the Jewish view of Abraham as a special representative of God, because of his faith. Almost in a formulaic way, James summarises his point in v. 24. But James’s point is that Christians will be obedient, and will act on what they believe.

Thomas Manton, a Puritan writer, comments on v. 24;

¹⁵ IBID, p. 349

“Works are an evidence of true faith. Graces are not dead, useless habits; they will have some effects and operations when they are weakest and in their infancy...This is the evidence by which we must judge, and this is the evidence by which Christ will judge...Works are not a ground of confidence, but an evidence; not the foundations of faith, but the encouragements of assurance. Comfort may be increased by the sight of good works, but it is not built upon them; they are seeds of hope, not props of confidence; sweet evidences of election, not causes; happy presages and beginnings of glory; in short, they can manifest an interest, but not merit it.”¹⁶

Brian Vickers points out;

“...Anyone who thinks that obedience is less important or necessary to Paul than to James has simply never read Paul closely enough. The same can be said of anyone who thinks that James is practically a second-string apostle. We desperately need them both, and only by preaching and teaching both do we have an opportunity to guard against the extremes of antinomianism and legalism...like James, we must be bold to tell people that no amount of confessional orthodoxy is enough to save anyone, and that being a dyed-in-the-wool believer of justification by faith is not the same thing as trusting in Christ for salvation.”¹⁷

Here is Leon Morris' take on this;

“It is important to notice that the kind of ‘works’ that James has in mind are those that are the outcome of saving faith. While it is true that he and Paul both use Abraham as their example, they are not talking about the same thing. They use different times in the patriarch’s spiritual pilgrimage, and they have different lessons to bring out. Paul speaks of the time when Abraham believed initially and his faith was reckoned as righteousness (Rom. 4:3,9f). He is concerned with justification. But James refers to the occasion when Abraham showed himself ready to offer up Isaac (Jas. 2:21), which took place many years later. He is concerned with the fruits of justification, the evidence that justification has taken place. He nowhere says anything that would lead us to think that he is opening the way to those works of the law which Moffatt defines succinctly as ‘observance of the ritual and ceremonial Law as constituting a claim for merit before God’. It is that Paul is concerned to oppose, but it is not this that James is concerned to uphold. His view is rather, ‘I by my works will shew thee my faith’ (Jas. 2:18). Paul is concerned with the means by which a man becomes a Christian, James with the characteristics of his life as a Christian. James does not mean by ‘faith’ what Paul means by ‘faith’, and he does not mean by ‘works’ what Paul means by ‘works’. Indeed, James’ ‘works’ look suspiciously like the ‘fruit of the Spirit’, of which Paul writes. James is not asserting that men may be saved without faith. His whole discussion presupposes that both he and those with whom he is arguing accept the basic importance of faith. But he emphasizes that faith cannot be said to exist apart from good works. The presence of faith is shown by works (Jas. 2:18). Paul would have been the first to agree with

¹⁶ Thomas Manton, from his commentary on James, as cited by John MacArthur in *The Gospel According to Jesus; What is Authentic Faith?*, Zondervan, Anniversary Edition, 2008, p. 262

¹⁷ Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace Through Faith*, P & R, 2013, p. 161

him that if there is real faith, there must be changed lives. “faith apart from works is dead” (Jas. 2:26).”¹⁸

So, in order to summarize this, we must understand that when James says that Abraham ‘was justified by his works’ in James 2:24, referring back to this Genesis 22 event, it is not his intention to say that Abraham obtained salvation or by this act earned God’s favour by his works. James understood that Abraham was justified – i.e., ‘declared righteous’ (or ‘born again’) on the day he ‘believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness’ (Gen. 15:6). To say it another way, “James knows that Abraham’s faith demonstrated its viability by its works.”¹⁹

If you will indulge me one more citation on this topic, please read with me the words of Adolf Schlatter, a Swiss theologian;

“That I say I have faith cannot possibly free me from sin, guilt, and punishment. How could something I say be my deliverance? Not that I say I have faith, but that I exercise faith, that saves me, situates me in God’s peace, brings me God’s grace, and is my righteousness before God...If faith gave me merely words, then it would be of use, after all, to say I have faith. But that is a sinister thought. Is that all I am, a thinker and talker? God has given me life, and that means he has planted a will in me that can act – that must act, with unalterable necessity...Service to God is action...I should thank God that I can act as one who trusts.”²⁰

¹⁸ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1965/1999, pg. 314-315

¹⁹ Daniel M. Doriani, *James-Reformed Expository Commentary*, P & R, 2007, p. 93

²⁰ Doriani, citing Adolf Schlatter, p. 94