

## *The Man Who Did What He Believed • James 2:20-24*

There is a knock at the door and police officers storm into your home and place you under arrest. Within hours you are charged and standing before a judge who insists that your life-or-death trial begin immediately. The charges against you are read. You are accused of being a Christian. You are asked how you plead to the charges. With a strong voice you answer, "I am a Christian. I have faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior from sin." In a stern voice the judge replies, "Are you ready to proceed with the trial to prove your faith?" You answer back, "I don't have to prove I have faith. That's all it takes to be a Christian—just simple faith in Jesus Christ." The judge smiles and says, "I think you need a lawyer. I'm assigning James to represent you."

James quickly walks forward, looks you straight in the eye and says, "*You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?* We don't have a lot of time here. I have done

this many times before and I can tell you it is usually pretty easy to prove a person is a Christian. We will just call a series of witnesses starting with your family. Each one will be asked to testify about the way you live, the things you do and the way you treat them at home. Then we will call your boss and coworkers, a few neighbors and friends and maybe some people from your church. If we allow each witness 30 minutes for testimony and cross-examination the trial should be over by tomorrow and the verdict rendered by Wednesday morning at the latest."

How do you think your trial would turn out? While you are thinking about it, consider another case, one of the most famous cases in history. It is the case of Abraham, one of the greatest fathers who ever lived. In fact, he is considered to be the physical or spiritual father of every Muslim, every Jew and every Christian in the world. The Abraham case is found in the Bible in James 2:21-24:

*As far as Abraham was concerned, if God said something it was as good as if it had happened.*

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Abraham's story began 2,000 years before the birth of Jesus when God invited him to leave his hometown and move west. He quickly obeyed and started on an adventure that took him to a new land, a new religion and a whole new way of life. His story is written in Genesis 12 through 25.

The great irony is that Father Abraham was childless. Infertility is not a modern problem. Abraham and

Sarah struggled with childlessness just like millions of couples today.

When Abraham and God first met Abraham was told that he would be the father of a great nation. Except that years went by and there were no pregnancies and no children. And even though God repeated the promise and the prediction many times, it didn't happen.

Abraham believed God anyway. It wasn't just because he wanted to believe or because there were any signs of hope. He believed simply because God said so. Abraham had faith!

God's reaction to Abraham's faith was spectacular. God pulled out Abraham's permanent file in heaven and wrote "RIGHTEOUS" in big red letters across the top. Not because Abraham had done anything good. Abraham did plenty of bad things. But Abraham had faith!

Some explaining is needed here. Do you know those television law stories where the judge and lawyers have degrees and understand all the

terminology and case history but the jury doesn't understand? The judge takes some time to explain the law to the jury in lay terms so they can make informed decisions. So let me explain to you how some of God's laws work.

God is perfect—he does everything right. If we want to be friends with God and be with him in heaven forever we have to be like God. He doesn't want people who are less than perfect to be with him and to be his friends and spend eternity in heaven. That's God's law.

That creates a huge problem because since the time of Adam and Eve all humans have been sinners and are therefore disqualified. We have lost God forever and there is nothing we can do to catch up. When we break the law there are no good deeds to reverse the crimes we have committed. So we are lost from God forever and headed to hell.

Under the law only God can change our permanent records from sinners to righteous. "Righteous" means that we are good and can belong to God's family and go to heaven. God does this through a legal transaction. He switches our sin to Jesus' file and Jesus' righteousness to our file. God and only God can do that. And the way he does it is in response to our faith.

Our faith looks back in history to when Jesus died on the cross to take care of our sin problem. When we really believe that, God makes the legal change in heaven. But what about people who lived before Jesus died on the cross? Just as we look back and believe what God did through Jesus Christ, so those who lived before the cross looked forward to what God was going to do through Jesus Christ. We have faith looking back; they had faith looking forward.

Does this make sense to you? Actually, it doesn't really matter whether we understand the law fully or not because that's the way the law is. It's the law. The big point in the case of Father Abraham was that when Abraham believed what God said God changed his file from "sin" to "righteous". And once God changes a record, it's per-

manent!

For the next 30 years Abraham acted out his faith in God. When his wife didn't get pregnant, he believed. When people laughed at his faith he still believed. As far as Abraham was concerned, if God said something it was as good as if it had happened. If there had been a Father's Day then Abraham would have celebrated it big time even though he had no children. He probably would have decorated the nursery and signed up for a college savings plan for his future children. In other words, Abraham not only believed God, he acted like he believed God.

Finally Sarah became pregnant when she was far too old to become pregnant. She had a son and they named him Isaac. Father Abraham was finally a dad. He must have been the happiest man on earth—until the unthinkable happened.

When a child of any age dies it is an indescribable tragedy for parents. It is not only the loss, it is the deep sense that it is out of order, it is not the way things are meant to be. Children are supposed to bury their parents, not parents bury their children. It is in some ways an even greater tragedy when the child who dies is an only child and the pain is multiplied when the parents, for whatever reasons, are unable to have any more children.

All of that was true for Abraham and Sarah, but as if that were not enough, Abraham was the one who was going to take his own son's life. He was about to sacrifice his only son because God said so. That ran counter to everything Abraham thought was right. It was counter to the promise God had given. It was unimaginable. It was disgusting. It was horrible. And it was a test. It was a test God gave to prove that Abraham's faith was real, to prove that his commitment to God was 100 percent and to prove that God's word ruled Abraham's life.

You can read the rest of this famous story for yourself in Genesis 22. Abraham agreed to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac on an altar. But God

***Good works, Christian behavior, acts of mercy—none of these make a person a Christian.***

intervened at the last minute and stopped him. Isaac lived, but Abraham proved his faith in God had no restrictions. He passed the test because his faith was real.

Often the hardest tests in life are what prove that our faith is real. The test of true faith seldom comes with fame or fortune or good times. The greatest tests of faith come when our disappointments are great, when health is poor, when marriage is hard, when children die and when obedience to God is very, very difficult.

The Abraham Case established a clear precedent: God credits faith as righteousness; real faith always works and works prove that faith is real. According to James 2:21-24:

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Abraham was not a perfect father. No one is. He made his mistakes and his sins are no secret. But he did some wonderful things as a dad. Number one, he taught his children how to have faith in God. Second, he showed his children how to live a godly life. And third, he was called “God’s friend”. What greater gifts could any father give to a son or a daughter than belief in God, living what he believes and being God’s friend!

But, back to the trial. We have imagined being on trial and being charged with being a Christian. We have pleaded “Faith” and the witnesses have been called. Questions have been asked. Testimony has been given, our checkbooks have been brought into evidence, our schedules, our

relationships, our behavior and choices have been examined. It is now time for the verdict.

Before the verdict is read there is something important to remember. Evidence in a trial does not make a person guilty or not guilty. All the evidence ever does is prove or disprove the defendant’s plea. It is the truthfulness of the plea that counts.

The same goes for being a Christian. Good works, Christian behavior, acts of mercy—none of these make a person a Christian. They just prove or disprove the claim that’s been made. Let me address a few final words to dads, although they apply to us all. Like Abraham, the most important thing you can do is to believe God. Have faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Act out your beliefs. Live Christianly. Be the same consistent Christian wherever you are. Your influence as a father could not be greater. It lasts far beyond your children’s baby years. Your influence will last for a lifetime. It will last for generations to come.

Be like Abraham. Believe and behave. And may the juries of heaven and earth be absolutely convinced that the way you behave is the way you believe—with 100 percent faith in God himself.

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