

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

1. This verse is a question posed by James and it begins with the phrase, “Was not Abraham our father ...? This indicates that James, who is a Jew, certifies that Abraham is the progenitor of the Jewish race.
2. Abraham started out as a Gentile whose name was Abram, the Hebrew proper noun, אַבְרָם (*'avram*): “exalted father,” which is used in Genesis 12:1
3. The Lord changed Abram’s name in Genesis 17:1 to אַבְרָהָם (*'avraham*): “father of a multitude.” In the context of that chapter, the Lord institutes the ritual of circumcision. It was an outward, physical confirmation of the promise to Abraham that “you will be the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:4).
4. In between these two verses we have the confirmation of Abraham’s salvation in:

Genesis 15:6 Then he had believed in the Lord; and it was credited to his account for righteousness.

5. His salvation occurred previous to this verse. His salvation occurred in his hometown of Ur after which he was commanded to leave the area and move to Canaan, documented in Genesis 12.
6. The pastor of the Jerusalem church is James, who is a Jew. His parents are Joseph and Mary; both are descendants of David of the tribe of Judah. James is teaching a congregation made up of Jews, therefore, he can correctly proclaim to them that Abraham is “our father.”
7. James has advanced in his epistle to James 2:21, where he uses Abraham as a superb example of justification by works. It’s a good example because what Abraham did was not possible until he was 120 years old.
8. How old was Abram when he left Haran? He was married to Sarai according to Genesis 12:4 when he was seventy-five years old. Forty-five years had passed before he was commanded to sacrifice his only legitimately born son, Isaac.
9. Abraham did not carry out the commandment to sacrifice Isaac on the spot. No, he was ordered to travel to a specific location to perform the task. His instructions were to leave Beersheba and travel to Mount Moriah where the deed was to be executed. Here is some information on the road Abraham traveled:



A north-south road handled mostly local Palestinian traffic rather than international commerce. It began at Beersheba and reached the central ridge of West Palestine at Hebron; it continued through Jerusalem.

11. The approximate distance between Beersheba and Jerusalem was about 45 miles. Donkeys could travel as much as twenty miles a day, about 15 if carrying a load. So it was on the third day when these men arrived at Mount Moriah.
12. Abraham had a three-day journey to consider the task ahead of him. On the first day he could have turned back, but he kept going. Same on the second day, but no turning back. Then on the third day he could see Mount Moriah, the site of the sacrifice. He continued his progress toward the objective.
13. Once at the foot of the mount, he dismounted and told his servants to wait with the donkey and said, “we will worship and return to you” (Genesis 22:5).
14. The word “worship” is the verb **שָׁחָה** (*shachah*). Its root meaning is, “to bow down.” Abraham did not do this physically, but mentally. He was bowing down mentally for three days running. What he was actually doing was concentrating on the Word of God as the working object of his faith.
15. This application of worship is taught by Jesus Christ in this New English Translation of:

John 4:23 “But a time [**an hour**] is coming—and now is here—when the true worshipers will worship [**predictive future active indicative of προσκυνέω** (*proskunéō*): referring to the Church Age] the Father in Spirit [**the filling of the Holy Spirit**] and truth [**doctrines learned from Scripture**], for the Father seeks such people to be His worshipers.

v. 24 God is a Spirit, and the people who worship Him must worship in Spirit and truth.”
(NET)

16. The principle to which the Lord refers is the new dispensation in which true worship is performed under the enabling power of the Holy Spirit Who teaches truth from the Word of God to the souls of positive-volition believers.
17. When a believer grows in grace by acquiring knowledge from imperative moods and passages that direct him to submit to certain behavior patterns, he is obligated to apply them in his personal life.



18. When executed, it is the result of his faith submitting to biblical principles followed by overt action. This is true worship. Without going through this process, activities that are referred to as worship are not.
19. Here are some examples of activities that should be motivated by resident doctrine but instead are “works without faith responding to human viewpoint: (1) pious expressions or posture, (2) observing the Eucharist, (3) singing hymns, (4) handing out tracts, (5) giving money, (6) constructing Jimmy Carter houses in the third world, or (7) winning a Sword drill.
20. True worship is the application of the Word of God to life and circumstances. The single most important issue in the Christian way of life is learning Scripture, retaining it in the soul’s stream of consciousness, and then, in the status of true worship, applying it to life and circumstances.
21. Genesis 15:6 is a report of Abram’s justification by faith in Messiah. James 2:21 is Abraham’s justification by works whose working object for his faith is the Abrahamic Covenant.
22. The doctrinal rationale for Abraham was complete trust in the integrity of God. God has promised him a great nation under the Abrahamic Covenant. He had promised him a son when he and his wife, Sarah, were both sterile. He had seen his son, Isaac, grow to maturity now old enough to extend the family’s chart pedigree which he would later do with his marriage to Rebekah and the births of Jacob and Esau.
23. Therefore, the commandment to sacrifice his son was something he had the courage to do based on divine promises already made to him. Abraham believed that in order for the promises to be fulfilled, God would bring Isaac back to life by resurrection.
24. Therefore, Abraham was not carrying out a ritual for the sake of doing a ritual. No father, without certain, confirmable guarantees, would harm his son by just blindly “following orders.”
25. Abraham has acquired power in his soul through the inculcation of doctrine, had seen God’s faithfulness toward him, and trusted His veracity was trustworthy beyond question.
26. Therefore, on Mount Moriah, Abraham was justified by works whose working object was directed toward the integrity of God and His promise.
27. What James is confirming, by distinguishing the differences between the two major events in Abraham’s life, is that there are two certifications of a man’s faith.



28. In Genesis 15:6, Abraham was justified by faith when the working object for his faith was the Integrity of God and His Messiah. In Genesis 22:1–10, Abraham was justified by works by preparing to sacrifice his son because the working object of his faith was the Abrahamic Covenant.
29. In order to please God, the believer must come to understand that divine good is the production of works accomplished by means of recall and application of the Word of God.
30. Therefore, two principles emerge: **(1)** A believer’s “works,” or production of divine good, are not the result of doing something he assumes is the “right thing to do.” **(2)** The working object of one’s “works” must find its catalyst and certification in the Word of God under the filling, recall, and application ministries of the Holy Spirit.
31. With this background, let’s start the exegesis of verse 21. It begins with the phrase, “Was not Abraham, our father, justified?” The verb is the aorist passive indicative of **δικαιόω (dikaiōō)**: “to vindicate, declare just, pronounce righteous, and stand approved, to be accepted.”
32. The verb is in the aorist tense and, in this case, is culminative:
- The Culminative Aorist.* The aorist is employed in this meaning when it is wished to view an event in its entirety, but to regard it from the viewpoint of its existing results. Here we usually find verbs which signify effort or process, the aorist denoting the attainment of the end of such effort or process.¹**
33. Abraham maxed out in doctrine when he led Isaac up Mount Moriah and then went about the business of preparing him for sacrifice. We see his determination to fulfill the mission in:
- Genesis 22:10** Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.
34. This is when the Lord called a halt. At the point of holding the knife, he was justified by works. The works included all Abraham had done from the day he was saved until the moment he was ready to slice Isaac’s carotid artery.
35. He had acquired a tremendous amount of doctrine over the years and this was the ultimate test to determine if Abraham had the doctrine necessary to take on the title, mentioned by James, of “our father.”
36. The “work” was accomplished by what preceded it, the accumulation of doctrine in his soul and the faith to rely on it unreservedly. That doctrine was the working object behind his willingness to slit his son’s throat.

¹ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillian Co., 1955), 196–97.



37. This resulted in Abraham's justification by works which emphasizes the culminative aorist of the verb *dikaióō*: "justification." The passive voice indicates that Abraham received justification based on his application of doctrine to his circumstances. The indicative mood certifies as a fact that the events on Mount Moriah occurred historically.
38. The principles we are to consider apply to our submission to the Word of God as the working objects of our works. First of all, Bible study must be preceded by rebound, confession alone to God alone of any unconfessed sins.
39. Then concentration must follow during one's inculcation of divine thought from the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. Positive volition must occur for the information to become *epígnōsis* in the *kardía*. Retention in the stream of consciousness makes the information available for recall.
40. Doctrine in the stream of consciousness is the inventory of divine thought that is potentially the working object for one's faith for application. When doctrine is used in application then divine good occurs.
41. God honors His Word wherever it is found including its presence in your soul and your application of it as the working object for your works.
42. It is the utilization of this system and its efficiency in time that becomes the determining factor in whether or not a Church-Age believer receives escrow blessings at the Evaluation Tribunal of Christ.
43. This production is the end result of learning the Word of God and having personal faith in its veracity. The production is indicated by the preposition **ἐκ** (*ek*): "out from the source of," followed by the plural noun, **ἔργον** (*érgon*): "works."
44. Abraham had spent three days under maximum pressure. He was told that he would be the father of multitudes. For this prophecy to come to fruition, he must be made fertile again. This occurred and the result was Isaac. For multitudes to be the end result, then Isaac, too, must procreate.
45. Now Abraham is ordered to take a three-day road trip to Mount Moriah and sacrifice Isaac on an altar of wood. Human viewpoint, absent resident doctrine, causes major doubt and reversion in the soul of anyone not armed with irrefutable promises to the contrary.
46. What source of power allowed Abraham to place his trust in God's integrity—His righteousness, justice, and omniscience—for him to keep advancing toward Mount Moriah?



47. Abraham has spent 45 years of taking in doctrine. He was sterile. Sarah was barren. Yet new fertile gametes were created and instead of being Semitic, they were of a new race called Jew.
48. We get details about this miracle from the Pass in Review² of faith-rest heroes recited by the writer of Hebrews in:

Hebrews 11:17 By means of doctrine [**resident in his soul**], Abraham, when he was tested, offered up [**as a sacrifice**] Isaac. Even he who had received the promises was offering up his only son.

v. 18 Toward whom [**Abraham**] it had been communicated [**in Genesis 21:12**], "That in Isaac shall your seed [**σπέρμα (spérma): sperm/gamete**] be designated."

v. 19 Having calculated [**accounting term**] that God was able [**had the inherent power**] to raise him [**Isaac**] up, even out from the dead [**resuscitation**], for which reason also, He recovered him [**back from the sacrificial altar**] by means of a type [**comparison with Jesus Christ Who would be similarly sacrificed**]. (EXT)

49. This passage gives a retrospective analysis about what happened on Mount Moriah among Abraham, Isaac, and God and provides details related to James's comments in James 2:21.
50. The grammar in verse 21 can be further amplified. It uses the phrase, "offered up" which is the aorist active participle of **ἀναφέρω (anaphérō)**. The prefix, **ἀνά (aná)**, means, "to lift upward" and with the noun, **φέρω (phérō)**: "to carry." Together it means to "lift up the body and carry it" to the altar.

² "If you've ever heard a West Point Band member (or anyone else affiliated with West Point) mention a 'parade' on the plain or a 'review,' these terms are synonymous with the 'pass in review.' The pass in review is a long-standing military tradition dating back to when Baron [Frederick] Von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge and reported to Washington during the American Revolution in 1778. Von Steuben's training technique was to create a 'model company' and one of the ways he did this was through drill and ceremony, which is still being used to this day. It is of interesting note that when he arrived, he spoke very little English (he is of German decent) and he would often order his translator to swear at his men for him in English. Upon his arrival to Valley Forge, the men were anything but a model company; that is to say until Von Steuben was through with them. He developed what is known as *Regulations for the Orders and Discipline of the Troops of the United States of America*, also known as the 'Blue Book.' The West Point Band and Hellcats are an integral and essential part of this long-standing military tradition." Dave Loy Song, "Life in the West Point Band: The Pass in Review," <https://westpointband.wordpress.com/2014/05/27/the-pass-in-review/>, accessed July 5, 2018.



51. Significantly, the action of this participle precedes the action of the main verb which is the aorist active indicative of **δικαιόω** (*dikaiōō*): “justified.”
52. The action by Abraham of lifting up and carrying Isaac to the altar preceded the action of justification. When Abraham unsheathed the knife, God intervened and stayed his hand resulting in justification.
53. The aorist tense of *dikaiōō* is culminative indicating a sequence of events denoting the attainment of the end of such effort or process. Abraham had built up doctrine in his soul over the course of 45 years since he departed from Haran up to the drama on Mount Moriah.
54. Over that time, his soul accumulated a high inventory of doctrine to which his faith could rely upon as working objects.
55. Those working objects supported a sequence of works that ultimately preceded the action of the main verb of being justified: faith + doctrine + application = works that resulted in the divine imputation of justification.
56. In the middle of all this is Isaac, his “adult son,” indicated by the masculine noun **υἱός** (*huiós*), who faithfully followed his father’s leadership and submitted to being laid upon the wooden altar.
57. The word “altar” is the noun **θυσιαστήριον** (*thusiastērion*). Its background is associated with the altars of the Tabernacle and Temple for the sacrifice of specific animals related to the Levitical Code.
58. Its use in James is unique since it refers specifically to the altar on which Abraham intended to sacrifice Isaac until the Lord intervened in Genesis 22.
59. The Hebrew word for “altar” is the masculine noun, **מִזְבֵּחַ** (*mizeach*): “to slaughter an animal, usually for sacrifice. The sacrificial system was at the focal point of the Israelite systems of worship. God commanded that the altar for burnt offerings be made of earth or undressed stones.”³
60. The altar, *mizeach*, was instituted for the Tabernacle’s sacrifices of burnt offerings in the outer court:

Exodus 20:24 ‘You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you.’
(NASB)

³ Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 589.

An altar erected for burnt-offerings must be of earth. This commandment necessitated that the name of Jehovah must first be known and trusted, before sacrifice could be presented to Him. The altar was not to be the object. But the name of Jehovah was that which the Israelite had to remember. And earth ready on the spot was to be used for building up a sacrificial place. (p. 307)

The altar of earth was a lowly thing, and stood out in contrast with the high places, selected by the heathen nations of Canaan, for their places of worship. Calvary was a place of no esteem. The Cross had no attractiveness for the eye, and He who hung on it had “no beauty that we should desire Him” [Isaiah 53:2c].⁴ (p. 308)

61. This excerpt and James’s reference in James 2:21 require that we now observe the original event that is documented in Genesis 22.

Genesis 22:1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” (NASB)

1. The importance of spiritual growth is imperative for God to issue blessings to believers. Failure to make the advance only delays the process. Abraham was no exception.
2. Abraham’s faith had to be tested before he was spiritually able to face the ultimate test that occurred in chapter 22. In the process, Abraham was challenged by the Lord to do certain things. Some he did and some he did not, so it was a learning curve.
3. First of all, Abram was born in Chaldea where its citizens were deep into the cosmic systems’ involvement in idolatry. The first order of business was to get him away from that area.
4. In Genesis 11:29–31, we learn that Terah moved his family out of Ur. It included his grandson Lot and his son Abram, whose wife was Sarai.⁵ Their destination was Canaan, but Terah only went as far as Haran and settled there. Here’s some background information on the city of Haran:

Haran. The city was on the busy caravan road connecting with Nineveh, Asshur, and Babylon in Mesopotamia, and with Damascus, Tyre, and Egyptian cities in the West and South. It was a natural stopping place for Terah and Abraham on their trek to Palestine.

⁴ Henry W. Soltau, *The Tabernacle: The Priesthood and the Offerings*, illus. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1972), 307, 308.

⁵ Interestingly, Scripture points out as early as Genesis 11:29 that, “Sarai was barren; she had no child.” Sarai realizes this in Genesis 16:2, “The Lord has prevented me from having children.” Later, in Genesis 17:16, the Lord provided “Sarah” with Jewish gametes as He tells Abraham, “I will give you a son by her.”



Interestingly, Haran, like Ur, was a center of the moon god cult. Whether Terah was a worshiper of the moon god Sin and refused to break with his idolatry is an open question. At any rate, when Terah died at Haran, Abraham and his nephew Lot and their families continued their migration southwest into Canaan, passing through the hill country of Shechem and on to Bethel. (pp. 535–36)

The Mari Tablets, unearthed in excavations at Mari ... belong to the eighteenth century B.C. Haran was also a flourishing city in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries B.C., as is known from frequent references to it in cuneiform sources. Cuneiform tablets from Nuzu [in Assyria] greatly illuminate the patriarchal age.⁶ (p. 536)

5. Terah died in Haran at the age of 205 (Genesis 11:32). The Lord then told Abraham to leave Haran and the area of Mesopotamia and go “to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation.” That proclamation in Genesis 12:2, “I will make you a great nation,” is the first mention of the Abrahamic Covenant.
6. This Covenant was repeated with the promise of a land grant in Genesis 13:14–18. Next, in Genesis 15, the boundaries of the land are given, including everything west of the Euphrates from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea southward to the “River of Egypt” (Genesis 15:18–21).
7. The next proclamation of the Covenant is in Genesis 17:4–8. In verse 5, the name Abram, “exalted father,” is changed to Abraham, “father of a multitude” of nations. The Covenant is declared to be everlasting in verse 8.
8. Following the events on Mount Moriah, the Lord again confirmed the “everlasting” paragraph of the Covenant in Genesis 22:15–18.
9. During these events, Abram had a number of failures. When a famine occurred in the Negev, he made a fateful decision to go to Egypt (Genesis 12:10–16). They were intercepted on arrival and Pharaoh’s officials took them to the king’s palace.
10. Fearful for his life, Abram told Sarai that she should claim to be his sister, which worked out well for him, but not for the Pharaoh. God the Father was having none of this and struck Pharaoh’s house with plagues. Another example of Abram’s human viewpoint rationales.
11. Back in the Negev, Abram went back to Bethel where he had established his tent before the excursion into Egypt. Abram was wealthy in livestock, silver, and gold (Genesis 13:1–4).

⁶ Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., ed. R. K. Harrison (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1988), 535–36.



12. Abram and Lot realized their livestock holdings had grown to the point they overwhelmed the land. Abram suggested they separate and offered Lot the first choice of the direction he would take. The land to the southeast looked inviting, so Lot moved his tents to Sodom while Abram remained in Canaan.
13. In Genesis 13:10, Lot was attracted to the “valley of the Jordan, that it was well-watered everywhere.” Some have challenged this passage since the area later became desolate. Cyrus Scofield has this instructive footnote:
- 13:10 well watered. At least as early as the time of Joshua, most of the Jordan valley was desolate, utterly unlike the description in this verse. Yet the destructive critics have thought that this story originated in the time of the later Israelite kingdom. Archaeological research has now proved that the Jordan valley was filled with populous cities for many centuries, but that most of these had disappeared by the time of Joshua. The spade of the archaeologist has served again and again to confirm the Scriptures, not to deny them.⁷**
14. In Genesis 13:16, the Lord again expanded the Abrahamic Covenant regarding his progeny, “If anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.” With that, “Abram moved his tent and settled down by the oaks of Mamre,⁸ which are in Hebron and built there an altar to the Lord” (Genesis 13:18).
15. Chapter 14 documents the Jordan Valley Campaign comprised of a Mesopotamian Allied Army under Chedorlaomer, king of Elam. This campaign consisted of a series of eight battles, the final one at the Valley of Siddim,⁹ the location of five cities called the Pentapolis.
16. Chedorlaomer’s victory over the forces of the Pentapolis completed his campaign and he headed back toward Mesopotamia by retiring northward up the Jordan Valley. Traveling with the army were hostages from the Pentapolis including Abram’s nephew, Lot.
17. This allied army was led by four generals, Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, Tidal, king of Goiim, Amraphel, king of Shinar, and Arioch, king of Ellasar. As they advance northward up the valley, a fugitive, who had escaped the Battle of Siddim, gave Abraham intelligence that this army was approaching with Lot held as a hostage.

(End JAS2-33. See JAS2-34 for continuation of study at p. 331.)

⁷ C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Study Bible: NASB* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26n13:10.

⁸ “Three men bearing the names of Aner, Eschol, and Mamre helped the patriarch Abram rout the invading Mesopotamian kings according to Genesis 14:24. Abraham had pitched his tents by the oaks of Mamre who is given the patronymic [ancestral name] Amorite” (R. L. Alden, “Mamre,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976], 4:48).

⁹ Including the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar.

