



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Book of James, The Faith of Abraham and Rahab

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James 2:20-26

²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ 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. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Our Study

You foolish man...

Foolish can mean empty or vain, and believing in a faith that does not produce good deeds trusts something that has no real content of truth. James’ words are startling to modern ears when nowadays religion is presented in such soft and undemanding terms. But, believing false and empty ideas has eternal consequences. James is just telling it like it is.

... do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

Useless means something that does not live up to its expectations—it is like a tree that does not produce fruit. Faith is often considered a private, personal feeling of spirituality that people are quick to claim. Our increasingly post-Christian society cares less and less about lifestyle choices and inappropriate behavior, but as long as a person can claim a private spirituality they *feel* justified. In effect the notion is, “I have a personal, private faith that is not your public business and my behavior is also a personal choice that I am comfortable with.” James is well aware of this approach to life, but he does not allow it as legitimate.

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

Now James proceeds to the evidence by recalling the deeds of Abraham. The NIV translation has softened the original language and sidesteps what some may consider a thorny problem. A more straight-forward translation would say, “Was not our ancestor Abraham *justified* (also see verse 25) for what he did ...?”

As we have previously noted, James is not teaching here the means of salvation, but rather the result of salvation. He is using *justified* in a different sense. We might do the same thing and say a piece of legislation was controversial but justified when it produced a just and favorable result. Or, we might say the sponsor of the bill was justified for the same reason. In these instances the word *justified* is demonstrating the wisdom and usefulness of the action. James is not referring to the doctrine of justification as the forensic declaration of God that we stand pardoned before Him. Words (like *justified*) are not self-defining. This causes misunderstandings in everyday life and also misunderstandings of biblical interpretation.

You see that his faith and his actions were working together...

Think about Abraham’s life and the ways he believed God. When we do this we will recall the ways his faith was demonstrated. Imagine a Bible that said something like this: “There was a man named Abraham who believed and trusted God and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. Now Abraham never did anything to demonstrate his belief and trust in God, and his life was filled with nothing but enmity toward God. Abraham lived in opposition to God’s instructions.” True faith in God produces deeds that are evidence of a lively faith.

... and his faith was made complete by what he did.

You may recall the previous discussion from verse 1:4 about the word *mature* which means complete or living up to its purpose. The same word (a form of *telos*) is used here for *complete*. Abraham’s faith was complete in the sense that it produced the results real faith ought to produce.

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: MONDAYS, 5:00 PM, ROOM 1425

STAFF: MONDAYS, 12:00 NOON, CHAPEL

North Carolina

James

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness..”

There are four ways we may consider how a person is saved¹:

1. Good deeds produce salvation.
2. Good deeds + faith produce salvation.
3. Faith produces salvation.
4. Faith produces salvation + good deeds.

The Bible does not teach number 1 even though many would wrongly declare that is exactly what the Bible teaches—“Keep these rules and regulations and you may earn God’s favor.”

Some see number 2 as the way to God. These folks know faith fits in somewhere but ultimately still believe deeds are essential to earn salvation. This is not the position of James or Scripture.

Number 3 is not wrong, but it is incomplete. This position what is often called “easy believe-ism” which is a presumption. Faith is all you need, but that faith has no particular content.

Number 4 is an accurate summary of true salvation. Faith produces salvation and salvation shows forth in good deeds.

... and he was called God’s friend.

What words can be used to express the inexpressible thought that a man might be God’s friend? What an honor for Abraham that he was considered to be a friend to the Almighty King of the Universe (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8).

Even more remarkably, Abraham is the father of those who come after him and they are also considered friends of God. Those who have the same real and demonstrable faith of Abraham are eligible to receive the same honors and privileges as Abraham. The teaching of Jesus reflects this truth. “You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:14).

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Here justified means vindicated. We could clumsily, but correctly, say that a person’s justification is justified by what he does as it expresses the reality of true saving faith. This is what James means by *justified* in this context.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?

Perhaps James chose Rahab as the next example because she is in so many ways the opposite of Abraham. She is female not male, lower class not upper class, immoral not moral, a pagan, and she is more an opportunist. Regardless of personal circumstances, both Abraham and Rahab trusted God and were saved, and their salvation was evidenced by works demonstrating that trust.

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

In the Bible, death is portrayed as separation. That is why Adam and Eve surely died the moment they sinned (Genesis 2:17). They were separated from God, from each other, from creation, from their own selves, and the separation of spirit and body was their earthly destiny.

What we call physical death is the spirit separated from the body. The body without the spirit has no life and is useless. So when faith is separated from good works it is said to be dead. It is a useless faith of no more value than a dead body.

Ponder this...

1. Is it biblical to judge whether a person is a true believer? If you were to judge, how would you do so?
2. What is God judging at the Final Judgment regarding good works?
3. What do you imagine James would have thought about memorizing Ephesians 2:8-9 without verse 10?

1. Daniel M. Doriani, *Reformed Expository Commentary, James*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007), p. 95