

A Faith That Works

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The last half of James 2 is a frequently used passage to answer questions like, “Is salvation by faith alone?” Or, “is it necessary to be baptized to be saved?” And the text certainly lends itself to such discussions.

But I am certain that the readers of James’ epistle believed that baptism was essential for salvation. They believed that salvation was not by faith alone. James did not write to them for the sole purpose of giving future generations some verses to use when talking to their religious friends about salvation. He meant to address the current needs of those he referred to as “my brethren” (1:2, 2:1) and “my beloved brethren” (1:19). He even asked the question in chapter 2, “what use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works” (2:14)?

Would you say that you have faith? If your answer is yes, do you know what James would say next? “Prove it. Show me.” What use is it to say you have no faith when there is no evidence to back up your claim?

James was not introducing a new concept in chapter 2. He had earlier written, “prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers only who delude themselves” (1:22). He challenged his readers to have a faith that works.

A faith that works is active. If I were to draw a picture of a Bible character, how would you be able to identify them? Do you what they looked like? What if drew a man who with three younger men was sawing, hammering, and nailing wood with the silhouette of a boat in the background? What if I drew a man standing over a young boy on an altar with a knife raised in the air? You would recognize them by their deeds, as those who were acting on their faith. “By faith Noah prepared an ark” (Heb. 11:7). “By faith Abraham offered up Isaac” (Heb. 11:17). They had a faith that worked.

Faith needs to be active among our brethren. “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food...” (James 2:15). We have those among us who have needs for meals, visits, transportation, or encouragement. When we hear the announcements or receive emails from the deacons, we need to respond with a faith that works.

Faith needs to be active in the fear of the Lord. “You believe that God is one. You do

well; the demons also believe, and shudder” (James 2:19). The word “shudder” or “tremble” is a Greek word that describes the hair on the back of your neck standing up. How long has it been since you read a passage or thought about the power of God and trembled before Him? This fear of the Lord should motivate us to have a faith that works before Him. For “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

A faith that works is successful. Abraham and Rahab were justified by their working faith (James 2:21,24). Abraham believed God and was declared righteous. In fact, James quoted from Genesis 15:6: “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Why? Because he had a faith that worked. Rahab the harlot brought about her salvation and the salvation of her household. She was rescued in every sense of the word because she acted on what she believed.

Abraham’s faith was “perfected” (James 2:22). It was made complete. Doesn’t that indicate that if it was not working with his works that it was imperfect, incomplete? When James says that faith without works is dead, it could be compared to money that draws no interest. It is idle, barren. “Can that faith save him” (James 2:14)? No! It is imperfect.

Abraham was called the friend of God (James 2:23). If you described your friend, what would you tell about them? The experiences you’ve had together, the places you’ve been, the memories you’ve shared. This is the kind of friend God wants. One who has a faith that works.

James concluded, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). When the spirit leaves the body, a lifeless form is left behind. So also is faith when apart from works. In the end, when we are standing before the throne of God, books will be opened and every person will be “judged by the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev. 20:12). The thing the Lord will be looking for is a faith that worked.