

A Faith That Works

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The passage on faith and works in James 2:14-26 is often used 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 to salvation. They understood that salvation was not by faith alone. He addressed the letter to “the twelve tribes who are dispersed” (1:1), asking them in 2:14: “what use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works?”

Would you say that you have faith? Most people reading this article would probably answer, “yes, I have faith.” Do you know what James would say next? Prove it. Show me. What use is it to say you have faith but then provide no evidence to support your claim?

This is no new concept or requirement. When Joshua gave his farewell address and challenged the people of Israel to “choose whom they would serve,” they answered, “we will serve the Lord!” Joshua said, “then put away the foreign gods that are in your midst and incline your hearts to the Lord” (Josh 24:23). Prove it! Jesus asked, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I say” (Luke 6:46)? Show Me!

James introduced this subject the same way: “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers only who delude themselves” (1:22). A faith that pleases God is a faith that works.

A faith that works is ACTIVE. If I were to draw a picture of a Bible character, could you recognize them by their appearance alone? 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 know them because of their actions. They were acting on their faith. That’s why Hebrews 11 reads: “by faith Noah prepared an ark” (11:7) and “by faith Abraham offered up Isaac” (11:17). They had a faith that worked.

Faith needs to be active among our brethren. Do we have a brother or sister among us who is “without clothing and in need of daily food” (2:15). Or any who have need for meals, visits, transportation, or encouragement? When you hear the announcements or receive emails from the deacons, how do you respond? To turn away or hope someone else answers the call is to have a faith that doesn’t work.

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” (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? Do you have more faith than an angel of the devil? This fear of the Lord should motivate us to have a faith that works before Him.

A faith that works is SUCCESSFUL. Abraham and Rahab were justified by their working faith (2:21,24). Justified means to be “declared righteous” or to be “set right.” 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 because she acted on what she believed.

Abraham’s faith was “perfected” (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; it doesn’t work and produces nothing.

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

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (2:26). At the judgment, every person will be “judged by the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev. 20:12). If a man has a faith that doesn’t work, “can that faith save him” (2:14)?