

Our Faith Tested

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Psalter 349

Scripture: James 2

Psalter 365

Psalter 150

Psalter 24

*Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when
he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?*

—James 2:21

Anyone familiar with the letter of James knows that this text is maybe one of the most disputed parts of the Bible. In chapter 1, he tells us to be doers of the Word. In chapter 2, he applies that to the sin of prejudice. Now he takes this to an extreme, almost causing Luther to reject it as God's Word. However, it is not as complicated as it appears. What we have here is our faith tested:

1. By what we *Know*
2. By what we *Feel*
3. By what we *Do*

By what we *Know*

Let's first consider the *question*. Verse 14: "Can faith save?" This is a rhetorical question: its answer is plain: an emphatic *no!* What? Can faith not save us? Isn't that a key doctrine of the Christian life? What about Ephesians 2:8–9, "For by grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast"? Does James

contradict Paul? No, not at all. James wants to make sure that we understand what faith is all about. You see, everyone has faith, believes in someone or something. The question is not whether or not we have faith, but is my faith true faith? And how do we know? It's a matter of life and death.

Second, the *illustration*. In verses 15 and 16, we read about a brother or sister in desperate need for clothes or food coming to your door to ask for help. Imagine it's a cold winter evening and you tell them to go in peace, be warm, and filled—without asking them in or at least, giving them clothes and food. What profit or good will that do them? Will your words make them warm and full? Of course not! You can say you have faith, but your actions reveal you don't have true, that is saving, biblical faith. So James really asks, "Can that faith save?" No, it's dead.

Third, the *point*. In verse 17, James says that such faith is dead, being alone. In 1:21, he wrote, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction." Now that's true faith in action. It's easy to say some words and make a profession of faith, but it's a lot harder to put them into action. We find this confirmed in Christ's words, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). We can know all the doctrines of God's Word, but without works we are still dead.

Fourth, the *challenge*. Verse 18: "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works." What James is saying is this: I can't see your faith without or apart from works, but I will show or demonstrate it by my works. Not faith *plus* works, but

faith *that* works. He is confirming the Apostle Paul, who wrote, “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love” (Gal. 5:6). Faith really is love in action. Beware of mere orthodox or intellectual faith, and of thinking you’re saved just because you’ve been raised in a Reformed church and are well versed in biblical truth. It’s very important to know the truth, but in the end, it’s not about how much you know but what you do with it.

By what we *Feel*

First, we consider another aspect of faith: *our feelings*. We often decide and act upon how we feel. Maybe we’re not as bold as some who say, “If it feels good, do it!” We often do know what is the right thing to say or do, but just don’t feel like saying or doing it. We then decide to speak or act against better knowledge.

When our faith is tested by our feelings or emotions, and when we are going through a rough time, we wonder if God is still present with us, because it doesn’t feel like He is. But consider how, when it’s dark outside and we cannot see or feel the sun, we still know it is there. Our faith is based on sure knowledge—not on our feelings. Of course, that does not mean true faith is without feelings, just as it is not without works. But they don’t precede faith; they follow it. They are a fruit of faith.

Second, the *assumption*. We’re all prone to evaluate what’s right and wrong by our own standards or by our own preconceived notions about it. We’re informed in part by our thinking and in part by our feelings and circumstances, past and present. I have asked people, How can you be sure about what you believe or what you’ve said or done is right? The answer I receive often is

based on the assumption that what I think, know, and feel is factual and neutral, and not biased by (a lack of) upbringing and education. The problem is that then my faith is as good or as false as yours. So we all live in our own universe. The answer should be, Let our faith and actions be according to God's Word, as we see in verse 18, "I will shew thee my faith by my works."

Third, the *example of demons*. James then tells them in verse 19, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble." That's good, but demons or devils do, too. They not only really believe and know that God exists, but they also have feelings: they tremble or shake with fear! They cried out in Matthew 8:29, "What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?" Though demons have a measure of faith, even believing they will suffer in hell, they do not repent and believe in Jesus.

Fourth, the *reality of universal faith*. We all not only have faith in something or someone, but we also deep down believe in the existence of the true God but, according to Romans 1, suppress this knowledge and therefore are more foolish than demons. The demons at least have the sense to tremble with fear! We all try to fill the void with other gods or idols—something to be devoted to, whether possessions or entertainment, while we know full well it won't satisfy. According to Romans 2, we will have to give an account of our actions. Some people believe and are excited for a while but give up, and so only have a temporary faith. Others are spared in an accident or healed from cancer and have what we call a miraculous faith. All from God? Yes, but that's not saving faith. Our intellect, our mind, or our understanding and knowledge as well as our emotions, such as fear,

excitement, and joy, are all involved, but they don't move our will. They don't move us to action or to works, to obedience and commitment. If it is to be true faith, it has to involve all three.

By what we Do

First, consider Abraham's faith and works. In verse 21, we read, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" Here the question of verse 14 ("Can faith save him?") is reworded as it worked out in Abraham's life. Once again, this is a rhetorical question, relating back to Genesis 22, where Abraham was called to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Isaac was the child he finally received after twenty-five years of waiting, believing, and trusting. "Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be" (Rom. 4:18). In other words, faith was first! When God called Abraham from among the Gentiles (Gen. 15), he believed God and acted on it. No wonder James confirms in verse 22, "Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?"

Abraham's obedience was faith in action. Faith "wrought" or worked, and so by works faith was made perfect. It did not add anything to faith; it is not faith plus works, but it was faith that works. That is the faith that saves, and it is God's work in us and by us. That's why Paul in Philippians 2:12–13 doesn't say, "*Work* your own salvation," but "*Work out* your own salvation with fear and trembling." He goes on to say, "For it is God which works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." James confirmed this in verse 23: "And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed

God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.”

But then comes what people call the difficult verse (v. 24): “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” James does not contradict Paul when he says we’re not justified by faith only; he’s fighting a very different battle. Paul uses Abraham’s example to destroy the notion of justification by works; James uses him to illustrate the futility of dead faith. The focus is not just on faith, but on faith in God and in His Word. True saving faith involves not only the mind and the emotions, but also the will to act upon it and demonstrate it. How can Abraham be justified by works if it is by faith alone? By faith, he was justified before God (his righteousness declared), and by works he was justified before men (his righteousness demonstrated). Abraham’s faith was put to the test. How does your faith test?

Second, consider Rahab’s faith and works. “Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?” (v. 25). “Likewise...”: it’s as if James anticipates the Jews objecting, “But that was Abraham! He was special.” He was a Gentile just like Rahab; one was in Mesopotamia, the other in Jericho! In other words, there’s no real difference in being a patriarch or having been a prostitute. It is the same faith and the same works. As we find in Hebrews a wonderful testimony about Abraham, so also about Rahab, “By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she received the spies with peace” (11:31). Hiding and helping the spies escape was an act of faith. Her faith also was demonstrated.

Third, our faith and works. James concludes in verse 26, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” We heard about Abraham and Rahab, but what about you? Your faith tested. How are you measuring up? I’m not asking if you passed this test with flying colors; but is there at least some evidence for others to see that your confession of faith isn’t words only, but also enthusiasm and actions? James emphasizes that faith without works is dead, while Paul emphasizes that works without faith in Jesus Christ is unacceptable to God. Someone wrote, “Creed and conduct cannot be separated any more than the body from its life-giving breath.” We also know what Jesus said in John 15:2: if we’re professing Christians, we are all branches in the vine, but it’s clear there are only two kinds: *fruitless* and *fruitbearing*. The first is burnt in the fire; the other is pruned so it will bring forth more fruit. How? Jesus said, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples” (John 15:7–8). Amen.