

## 17. Scriptural Evidence

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

*(James 2:20-26)*

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### A Word for the Other Side

In the previous chapter, we looked at James' powerful conclusion that faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead. We may claim that we believe, but if this is not visible in deeds, our claim has no substance. Yes, we are saved only by faith, through grace. James' intent is not to state that we are saved by faith *and* works. He is powerfully maintaining quite another point: saving faith is visible in deeds, in concrete action. If faith is nothing more than an intellectual agreement that there is a God and Lord Jesus Christ, our faith is no better than or different from that of demons who also believe those things. Their belief, however, leads them not to obedience, but to a burning, bristling anger against God and all that belongs to him.

In 2:20-26, it is again made clear that James knows very well that his line of thinking will upset some people. Already in 2:18, he has dealt with a possible, or shall we say probable, objector, someone who concludes that faith and doctrine are unimportant and that only deeds matter. James refutes this by

clearly stating that there can be no deeds without faith. He directly follows this, however, with a word for the other side, for people who say that faith and grace are all that counts and that works are not important. These are the people who say, “All you need is faith. Adherence to the true doctrine is vital, and nothing else. If you emphasize works, you devalue grace.” This was also Luther’s great concern.

James very vigorously attacks this position also. He states that we are not saved by dead faith, but by faith acting in love. We may distinguish between faith and deeds, but we may not separate the two. James calls the one who would separate the two, “you foolish man.” This is quite different from James’ usual address of “dear brothers”. Literally, the word “foolish” has something to do with being empty. Some people think they are very religious, but in fact they are as empty as can be, shallow Christians who are not around when things need to be done.

It is quite something to make statements like that to the churches. Can James substantiate this? He writes, “You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?” This is the matter of the text we will deal with in this chapter. James must provide evidence, and it is important to note that the evidence he provides is from the Scriptures. He does not come with human interest stories or with any personal testimonial, even though such may be valid in certain instances. Instead, James comes with the evidence of Scripture. That must be the final word.

There is an important aspect here. We can say something any way we want, but ultimately we need to prove it from Scripture. The only evidence that stands in the forum of God and man is biblical. We see in 2:20-26 how the Lord provides Scriptural evidence that faith without deeds is useless. We see this mightily established in the life of Abraham the patriarch and miraculously confirmed in the life of Rahab the prostitute.

### **The Example of Abraham**

James begins with the example of “our ancestor Abraham”. The word “ancestor” means here the founding father, therefore I formulated “the patriarch Abraham”. Surely such an ancestor would show forth the “pattern” that God has laid and requires in the lives of his children?

Somebody may say, “Prove from the Bible that faith without works is dead.” James retorts with saying, “Okay, let us go back to our ancestor

Abraham.” He then mentions the willingness of Abraham to go and sacrifice his only son, Isaac, upon God’s command.

James is referring to what is described in Genesis 22, which we will examine later. As he works this out, however, he *quotes* from Genesis 15 where we read how God takes Abram outside his tent, tells him to look up into the heavens, and to count the stars if he can. We then read the following: “Then [God] said to [Abram], ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:5-6). That night, Abram believed the LORD and was justified by God through faith.

Abram was justified by faith and so became “the father of all believers”, as Paul writes to the Romans. But James refers us first to the moment when God called Abraham to sacrifice his son. Isaac had been born when Abram was 100 years old. We might figure that, by this time, Abraham’s faith had been well-tested and had grown to maturity. Abraham should not have had to “prove” or show anymore that he believed in God.

The call to sacrifice Isaac came when Isaac was already a lad. God had confirmed Isaac’s position, Ishmael had been sent away, and it was clear that Isaac was the heir to the promises of God. Abraham believed this, as he had done since that night he looked up at the stars. How wondrously had the LORD fulfilled his promises to the believer Abraham! Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about” (Gen 22:2).

As we read in Genesis 22:1, the verse immediately preceding, God wanted to test Abraham. Did Abraham build his future on Isaac or on the promises of the LORD? Abraham could have protested and said, “Wait a minute, I have always believed you and I have already been justified by faith. I do not build on Isaac or on any human, but I build on you alone! Leave me be now, for what more can I do? What nonsense, to sacrifice to you the son you gave to me. There goes your promise you gave me that night, remember? I do not understand this at all!”

### **An Incredible Act of Faith**

Abraham was justified by faith, and then called to perform an incredible act of faith, years later. James writes about it in his letter: “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete (literally, mature) by what he did” (2:22). We do not face just one little test of

faith, but constant testing by the LORD God so that our faith may mature. Recall from James 1 how we face many trials in this life.

We often say that justification by faith happens once for all. It is a one-time act of God by which he declares us righteous. That is true, yet time and again faith must show that it is alive, active, and growing towards maturity. Abraham was therefore asked to take his only son and sacrifice him (and emphasis was placed on Isaac being his only son, whom he loved). Abraham was expected to get up and do it because he believed in the promises of God. Go, and act in faith.

Sometimes the LORD takes things from us in his deep wisdom, as is his sovereign right. He says, "I will take this," and we say, "Okay." He says, "I will take this also," and we say, "Well, if you must," and then he says, "I will take this, too," and we say, "No, not that, do not put that burden on me for my faith cannot handle that!" And then God replies, "Am I not the One who gives faith and strength?" We must say with Paul in Philippians 4:13, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." This is not man-centered, but theo-centered and Christological: the power and the maturity of faith is in him who strengthens us.

In Hebrews 11:17, we read that "by faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." This is a powerful example of faith mightily established in works!

## **God's Friend**

Abraham thought, "I will sacrifice Isaac. What will happen then? I do not know, but I do know that God is able even to raise the dead! I must do what I have to do." His faith was at work, "and the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" And James adds that "he was called God's friend." What a name! Abraham did not give himself the name, but he was called this by God himself. True friendship is the ultimate relationship of trust.

Our Lord said to his disciples, and thereby also to the New Testament church, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from the Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). Jesus hides nothing from us that we should know as children of God. He wants us to have

the maturity of faith, in knowledge and in deeds. He gave all, so that we would give all. He offered himself as a sacrifice in our place, for he believed the promise of God. He could say in truth, "I am the resurrection and the life." We can go to him in all trials, and he will strengthen us and bring our faith to completion and maturity.

We can say that Abraham as a patriarch, a founding father of Israel, and as God's friend might be expected to have a mature and active faith. Granted, Abraham did not have this faith of himself, for it was given to him, but nevertheless he is one of the greatest figures mentioned in the Bible. In Abraham's life, the victory and maturity of faith certainly becomes evident. Abraham belongs in the "hall of faith" of Hebrews 11. We do not have a hall of fame, but a hall of *faith*, where all true believers have their place by grace.

### **Rahab the Prostitute**

Certainly, Abraham is one of the great figures in the history of redemption. From such a great man we may expect great things. If we want to learn something, we should go to the patriarchs. We would not expect this from a prostitute. It is therefore striking that James also refers to Rahab the prostitute. He writes in 2:25, "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous...?" It is a rather large step from a patriarch to a prostitute. The lady in question is not even an Israelite, but a Canaanitess, one of the cursed race that God would destroy. We might think that surely better evidence can be brought to bear.

There is no better evidence. James recognizes that Rahab is in a special category, for he writes "*even* Rahab..." She is mentioned in Hebrews 11:31 as well, and there also qualified as "the prostitute." We read, "By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient." The name "prostitute" is almost synonymous with Rahab. The Bible never covers up sins, even when they are forgiven. Sins are covered, not covered up, and forgiven, not hidden.

Why was Rahab the prostitute saved? Why is she considered righteous? Is it because she knew so much about the history of redemption, or because she was good at heart? No, it is because she had a certain faith and acted accordingly. We read in Hebrews 11 that Rahab welcomed the spies, and this does not just mean that she said, "Oh, here are two Israelites. How nice, come on in." Her welcome meant offering the protection of her house and family, at the

risk of her own life. Rahab was offering to harbor the enemy and treat them as friends. This was high treason, for which she could have been hanged.

When we read the history itself in Joshua 2, we note that the matter was complicated by the fact that people saw the two spies going into her house. They reported to the king that spies were at Rahab's house. She responded that they had indeed been there, but had left, while in fact she had hidden them under stalks of flax on the roof. It was an outright lie and a risky scheme.

Why did Rahab do this? We also find the answer in Joshua 2. She had come to faith in the power of the LORD, the God of Israel. Everyone in the entire region knew of God's power and glory, from the day of the great exodus. Everyone in Jericho also knew, but only Rahab confessed the truth. She saw the ramifications of what was happening. God gave her this insight and led her to faith, and by that faith she acted. Now we can stop analyzing Rahab, for her faith is a miracle, but the point is that her faith became evident in deeds. The evidence can be found with patriarchs, but also with prostitutes. What God established through Abraham, he confirmed through Rahab. God is not limited by race or by our morality; he saves whom he wills in sovereign power. He saves out of grace, in Christ, by faith, and then faith becomes visible in deeds. This is the undeniable evidence of Scripture.

## **Remarkable Examples**

God takes the most ill-equipped people and makes them his instruments for the sake of his people's salvation and the glory of his Name, for he is the LORD God Almighty. He chose Abraham, who was old and had a barren wife, and he chose Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute. A "wall-flower" from Jericho became a fruit tree in Jerusalem, listed in Matthew 1:5 in the lineage of our Lord and Savior, and who but the LORD can do such things?

What do we really know about Rahab? There are many Jewish legends about her, but we will not even begin to consider them, for the evidence of *Scripture* is overwhelming. Here we read about a woman who understood the critical situation of her people. She also knew that the LORD is King. She did not betray her people by hiding the spies, rather, she realized that her people had fallen into apostasy as she herself had. Rahab knew the only hope was that the God of Abraham would be gracious to her, and so she risked her life in order to save it.

Abraham and Rahab are such remarkable examples because, even though they had a different background and a totally different course of life, in the end they had to lay it on the line and risk everything – Abraham at Moriah and

Rahab with the spies. Their question was, “Shall I serve the LORD and live, or seek this world and die?” Faith always demands such decisions, also of us. These are decisions that lead to actions, and faith that leads to works.

## “FaithWorks”

In 2:24, James comes to an initial conclusion on the basis of the Biblical evidence. He has used only one example at this point, but it is very convincing. The phrase, “you see,” indicates that the conclusion is not forced upon the reader for it is self-evident. “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” The positive conclusion is restated in a negative manner, like a mirror image, in 2:26: “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” A faith that does not act is like a body that is dead. There is no life left in it. It is non-functional and unproductive.

Let us not forget one important matter: everything in life fluctuates. In the Canons of Dort, we confess that by gross sins we can sometimes “suspend the exercise of faith” and sometimes even “lose the sense of God’s favor.” We are not always assured of God’s preservation as we should be. Then we must begin anew, going back to basics. We must return to God, build on his promises, work with his Word, believe in his Son, and walk by his Spirit. And so we will come to do again the works of faith.

*FaithWorks* is a name used for various mission projects outside of Canada, led by Christians who want to help their less fortunate neighbors. Going abroad, especially to the third world, is an incredible experience. There is also a sense of adventure that goes along with it, and there is nothing wrong with that. When we think of “FaithWorks”, however, we can also stay a little closer to home. There are the elderly and handicapped who could use a visit now and then. We should attend church more regularly in the place where we live. We should not entertain relationships with those who do not serve the Lord properly. God calls us to be where the whole truth is proclaimed. We should improve our relations with our spouse, children, and extended family. We should apologize for things we said or did wrongly. We must help to maintain the ministry and the schools, as we confess together in Lord’s Day 38. These, and much more, are also “FaithWorks”.

There is more work in our own local areas than we can imagine. And if we have done these things and more, perhaps then we can also check out the projects in the Appalachians or the Dominican Republic. I have no problem

with that whatsoever, as long as we remember that “FaithWorks” begin at home.

“Faith without deeds is dead,” writes James. That is the evidence of Scripture, demonstrated fully in the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ who poured out his Spirit over his people. Now the question really becomes important: how alive is our faith, now?

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