

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF "FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD?"

James 2:17-26 is often cited as support for the idea that salvation is by faith coupled with obedience to laws and ordinances. In particular verses 17, 20, 24, and 26 are thought to disprove salvation by faith alone. However, a careful consideration of the context reveals a significantly different interpretation.

The overall point of this passage is that genuine faith produces works. In fact James clearly says in verse 18, ". . . I will shew thee my faith by my works." This becomes a challenge for every Christian to do the same. As support for the appeal, examples are given of people who have shown their faith by their works. First we are reminded of Abraham's offering of Isaac on the altar (verses 21,22). Another demonstration of faith is the obedience of Rahab (verse 25). But it must be noted that faith alone saved these two Old Testament characters, enabling them to perform acts pleasing to God. Abraham was saved (justified before God) by believing (verse 23; Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-5). His works, including the offering of Isaac many years later, justified him before men (Genesis 22:1-18). Rahab was saved (came to faith in the Lord) before the event mentioned by James (Joshua 2:10,11). Her protection of the Israelite spies merely showed that faith. In neither the case of Abraham nor Rahab did works produce salvation. The works were, instead, the result of having been saved through faith.

As final proof one additional illustration is presented, a parallel between physical and spiritual life (verse 26). James wants us to see that just as there are always signs of life in a living body, it is equally true that whenever saving faith is exercised there will be signs of spiritual life. Without salvation through simple faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, a person is spiritually dead and cannot produce spiritual works (Ephesians 2:1-3). However, once an individual becomes spiritually alive through faith, it is then possible to show faith by works (Ephesians 2:8-10). Certainly no one would maintain that he received physical life as a result of his own works! Neither is spiritual life (salvation) received through one's own effort, though that life will issue forth in good deeds.

James freely admits that some claim to have faith, but it actually is not faith at all. They would act very differently if they had true faith, if they were truly alive spiritually. Their kind of "faith" cannot save them. Only real faith saves. Therefore, far from arguing against faith alone, James is strongly advocating unpolluted faith as the exclusive means of salvation. Indeed he insists that good works accompany salvation. But the crucial distinction to be made is that works are the result of salvation, and not to any degree its cause.

Lloyd A. Larkin
lalarkin@burgoyne.com