



## LIVING FAITH

*“21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? 22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 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. 24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”*

- James 2:21-26

## Living Faith

Open your Bible to James chapter 2 as we come for this discussion to verses 21 through 26. James chapter 2, verses 21 through 26.

Now, one of the most important and, at the same time, one of the most frightening truths in all of the Scripture, I believe, is that there is a faith in God. There is a faith in Christ, there is a belief of Scripture, there is a belief of the gospel that does not save from hell. Let me say that again. There is a faith in God, there is a faith in Christ, there is a belief of Scripture and a belief of the gospel that does not save one from hell.

It is possible to believe in God, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to even believe that what Christ did He actually did, to affirm the cross and the resurrection and never be delivered from sin and never be given eternal life. That is what James would call dead faith. He mentions it in verse 17, "Faith, if it has not works, is dead." He mentions it again in verse 20, "Faith without works is dead." And he mentions it a third time in verse 26, "Faith without works is dead."

And in verse 26, he identifies it like it were a corpse without life, a corpse lying in a casket, all dressed up, all made up, looking very lifelike but with no internal life principle, no breath, no movement, nothing but a mannequin with a painted smile.

Now, James is very exercised in his spirit, that no one under his care would escape the understanding of this great truth. As any faithful pastor would want to warn his people about the reality of non-saving faith, so James has that desire as well. He has already brought it up back in chapter 1. Do you remember verse 22? "Be ye doers of the Word." That means that whatever has happened in your life produces obedience to Scripture and not just hearers deceiving your own selves. In other words, don't be under the illusion that because you hear truth and your mind affirms truth that that is enough. What is enough is when you begin to produce truth in your living. Those are the works that he has in mind here in chapter 2.

“Faith,” says James, “without a corresponding change of life, without a transformation, without a product, has no evidence and therefore is not real. The point, then, that he’s making is very clear: non-saving dead, lifeless faith is known by the absence of righteous deeds.

Now, let me take it a step further. Faith is invisible. You can tell me you have faith, but I can’t see that faith unless you show me that faith. And you can’t show me that faith unless you show it to me in a transformed life. It is not enough to say you have faith; that proves nothing. That’s merely an affirmation which may or may not be true. Faith, in a sense, is like the wind. You can’t see it; you only see its effects. It’s like electricity; you can’t see it, but you can feel and enjoy and appreciate its effects. It’s like radio waves. You can’t see them; they’re invisible. But you can appreciate their effect.

Faith is not known to be real until it is evident in action, deeds, in doing, as chapter 1, verse 22 put it, or in works as we see here in chapter 2. Faith, in James’ mind – you must understand this – is a statement equal or a word equal to spiritual life. When he says, “Faith without works is dead,” what he really means to say, if we can clarify it that way, is, “Spiritual life without works is dead.” There’s no real life there at all. Unless you show me a transformed life, there is no way that our faith can be verified to me or, in fact, to you.

Now, James is setting forth, as you well know, a crucial teaching regarding true salvation. Because as we’ve been learning all along, Christ and all the New Testament writers are very concerned about people who may be self-deceived as to their faith. And that ought to be a major preoccupation of every pastor today, because churches are literally filled with people who are under the delusion that they have saving faith and are looking forward to heaven when the fact is there has never been a transformed life, and therefore there’s never been a justifying change in their innermost being.

In Ephesians chapter 2, it says, “For by grace are you saved through faith; that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.” And there the indication of Scripture is you’re saved by grace through faith, not of works. But then he says, in verse 10, “God has created you unto good works, which God has before ordained that you should walk in them. Saved by grace, through faith, unto good works. The absence of good works is an indicator of the absence of real saving faith.

At the end of the tenth chapter of Hebrews - you are familiar, I know, with this text – it says in verse 38, “The just shall live by faith; but if any man draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him. We are not of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.” And what the writer of Hebrews is saying is there is a belief that is not to the saving of the soul. There is a belief that goes so far and falls back. There is a belief that goes all the way to the saving of the soul.

In Matthew, we remember very well chapter 7, where Jesus in verses 21 to 27 deals with those people who have a false faith. “Many shall say unto Me, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not done this, don’t this, done the other?’”

“He says, ‘Depart from Me; I have never known you, you workers of iniquity.’” In other words, it isn’t what you say; it’s what you produce, and what you produce is iniquity. Therefore, what you say is meaningless. It is the life pattern that validates or invalidates the claim to salvation.

The first thing he does in verses 14 to 20 is to describe dead faith. He says it has three characteristics. Number one, an empty confession, verse 14, “What does it profit, my brothers, though a man says he has faith and has not works? Can that kind of faith save him?” What’s the answer? No. And that’s implied in the question. That kind of faith can’t save him – can it? – is the Greek design of the original text.

First of all, dead faith is an empty confession. It is a faith without a product. It is a man who simply says and never does. It is a claim without verification. There are no works. There’s no patient endurance in trials. There is no true holiness, purity, humility, and open reception of God’s truth. There is no obedience and submission to the Word. There’s no control of the tongue. There’s no godly compassion. There’s no brotherly love. There’s no abstinence from worldly things. There’s no impartiality. And all of those things are the issues he discussed in the first two chapters.

As Hebrews 6:9 says, “He must show” – quote – “the things that accompany salvation.” The saving work of God provides, in a soul, repentance and love for God, and love for Christ, and hunger for righteousness, and desire for the Word, and hatred of sin, and obedience to God, and submissiveness to His will.

In fact, if you look at Hebrews chapter 11, you'll meet all the heroes of faith, and you will find that all the heroes of faith were known by their – what? – their works. Every one of them is characterized by what he or she did, because that's the only way faith can be demonstrated.

A poet puts it this way, "Let all who hold this faith and hope/In holy deeds abound/Thus faith approves itself sincere/By active virtue crowned."

The second thing James says is that false faith is indicated by a false compassion. In verses 15 and 16, he talks about a brother or sister being destitute, naked, cold, and hungry, without food. Somebody coming along and saying to them, "Be warmed and filled," if it's in a middle voice, as we saw last time, he's saying, "Warm yourself and fill yourself. Don't bother me with your problems." If it's a passive voice, he's saying, "I hope you can be warmed, and I hope you can be filled by somebody else, certainly not me." And he goes on his way. "What does that profit?" he asks at the end of verse 16.

What good is that kind of faith that knows no compassion? What good is that kind of faith that knows no brotherly love? What good is that kind of faith that does not act toward another as Christ would act toward another. Don't tell me that's saving faith, because there's no changed nature, because a redeemed soul will respond as the Redeemer would respond, for the redemption brings about the life of God in the soul of man. And the life of God is expressed in the attitudes of God. So, false compassion can be added to empty confession.

Then in verse 17 and 18, "Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone. If a man says, 'You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without your works, and I'll show you my faith by my works.'" He says, "If a man just walks up and says, 'I'll show you my faith without my works,'" – James - as if debating with some imaginary antagonist who would say that; there must have been some in the assembly to which he writes – says, "'You say you have faith, do you? Show me your faith without your works.'" And the man stands there, unable to do it. You can't do it; it's impossible; faith is invisible.

"So, you say you have faith, do you? And you don't need works? Then you show me your faith." Impossible. So, the third element of non-saving, false, dead faith is a shallow conviction. It's brought out in verse 19. The man says, "Well, I believe in orthodox truth."

James says, “You believe in God, do you? You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.” In other words, at best your faith is demon faith. Don’t pat yourself on the back because you believe orthodox truth. Demons are orthodox. Do you know the demons are orthodox? Let me give you a little insight into that. In Matthew 8, one of the demons said to Jesus, “Why are you here to torment us before the time?” Remember that statement? A demon said, “Why are you here to torment us before the time?” Do you know what that tells me? The demons have a very established orthodox eschatology. They have an orthodox eschatology. They also have an orthodox Christology. “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” They understand the Church. They understand the work of the Spirit. They understand the trinity. They understand everything. They’re all orthodox as we’ve been seeing. And they know the truth, and they believe the truth, but they shudder. They don’t love the truth; they don’t love righteousness; they don’t love God; they don’t love purity and love holiness; they love everything rotten, everything evil.

So, demon faith is orthodox; it just doesn’t save. And what he’s saying is, at best, just being orthodox is no better than demon faith, and demon faith is damning faith. So, verse 20, he repeats, “Will you know then, O empty-headed man, that faith without works is dead?” Don’t give me some shallow conviction about your orthodoxy. Don’t try to indicate some false compassion by wishing well on people – wishing well to people who are in need, and don’t make some empty confession to have a faith that produces nothing. This is a dead faith. No spiritual life, no true love of God, no love of holiness, no pursuit of holiness, godliness, righteousness, no hunger for the Word.

Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “If any man be in Christ, he’s” – what? – “a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” In dead faith there’s no spiritual triumph in trouble. There’s no living faith that evidence is itself with endurance, with joy in difficulty. There’s no eager readiness to respond to the Word. There’s no hunger and longing for purity. There’s no close self-examination to see sin. There’s no continual driving, internal desire to be exposed to the cleansing of the Word. There’s no control of the tongue to be used for the glory of God and the edification of others. There’s no true compassion, love, and generosity to those in serious distress, and there’s no broken, humble, meek spirit. It’s a lack of real transformation. That’s dead faith.

Now in verses 21 to 26 – and that was just a quick review – in verses 21 to 26, we have the contrast of living faith, and I want you to see this. This is so marvelous and so powerful a text because the illustrations are so very graphic.

Let's look at verses 21 to 26. The contrast of living faith. James has shown us what dead faith is; now he wants to show us by contrast what living faith is. And he is still structuring his argument as if it were a debate with a Jew in the assembly who's arguing that a faith with no works is still a saving faith. That's really behind this, as we pointed out last time, and I'm trying not to go over everything, but somebody in the assembly's going to say, "Well, all we need is faith, and all there needs to be is grace, and it doesn't have to show up in your life. It's not by works. And, boy, we're out of legalism, into antinomianism, doing our thing. Faith is enough."

And so, James structures his argument against that kind of thinking – that kind of thinking that says, "Faith alone is enough, and if there's nothing ever produced in your life, it really doesn't matter. It's simply a matter of believing, and salvation is nothing more than forensic, and justification is nothing more than God saying, 'You're justified.' It doesn't necessarily include a transformed life." That is so foreign to Scripture. But that's the kind of thing James is debating as he talks with this antagonist that he has hypothetically created.

Now, to make his point of what really constitutes living faith, he uses three illustrations. As he had three elements or characteristics of dead faith, he has three illustrations of living faith. Number one is Abraham. And this goes from verse 21 to 24. Let's begin in verse 21, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" Now that verse has really caused paroxysms for many people. Abraham justified by works? This is what Martin Luther got all mixed up about, and then called this an epistle of straw because he couldn't figure out what that was really saying.

Let's take it carefully, and I want you to understand what James is saying. "Was not Abraham our father" – now, there is a sense in which Abraham is the father of all Jews, and since James, a Jew, the half-brother of our Lord, is writing to scattered Jews – as chapter 1, verse 1 says – he could be saying "Abraham our father" in a Jewish sense. "Our father" in a racial sense.

In fact, in Romans 4:1, Paul says, “Abraham, our father,” pertaining to the flesh. In John 8:37, Jesus said to the Jews – He says, “I know that you are Abraham’s seed.” So, there’s a sense in which James can be saying “Abraham our father” in a physical, natural, racial sense. The great patriarch was certainly the symbol of all that was Jewish and all that was to be honored among Jews, since he was their honored progenitor. He was also the standard of righteousness for all of the Jews.

But James has in mind more than that. And when he says “our father Abraham, he has in mind that Abraham is the father not only of the Jews racially, but of all people who believe in God unto salvation, whether they are Jew or Gentile. He is, in a sense, the father of all the faithful, of all those who believe. This is a very important emphasis that the apostle Paul wants us to understand in writing the epistle to the Galatians.

And so, in chapter 3 and verse 7, Paul says, “Know ye, therefore, that they who are of faith, the same are the sons of Abraham.” So, then, verse 9 says, “They who are of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.” There is a spiritual sense in which all who believe are somehow connected to Abraham. He is the model of faith, and we sort of follow that model. He is the classic illustration of saving faith. In that sense, he is the father of the faithful. And you often hear people say, for example, that George Washington is the father of our country. Now, we don’t mean by that that George Washington fathered every person in America. We don’t mean that. We mean there’s a sense in which he is all that embodies the greatness of America. He is the one who gave structure and life and destiny and future to this nation.

So, Abraham, in that sense, is the father of the faithful. He set the model and the example of believing in God. The first great, classic, ancient illustration of saving faith, with specifics, was Abraham.

So, James identifies, then, Abraham as the father not only of the Jews, but the father of those who believe. So, remember now, he is writing to an assembly of believers. So, it would not be out of character for him to say to them “our father” not only in the Jewish sense but also in the sense of faith. “Was not Abraham, then, our father” – now here’s the key word – “justified by works” – stop at that point.



Now, immediately, everything in us that's evangelical goes, "Hold it right there. Justified by works?"

What does it mean to be justified? It means to be considered right with God.

"You mean to say Abraham was considered to be right with God by works?" Someone blows the whistle and says, "Foul. This cannot be possible."

And invariably, where they take us is to Romans 4. So, let's go there. Romans chapter 4. Now I want you to follow very carefully as I just hit some key highlights here. In Romans chapter 4, the discussion is about Abraham. Paul starts out like this, "What shall we say, then, that Abraham, our father" – he uses the same phrase – "as pertaining to the flesh, has found? If Abraham were justified by works, he had something of which to glory, but not before God."

Now, wait a minute; James says Abraham was justified by works. Paul says, "If Abraham were justified by works, he would have something to glory of, but not before God." What does the Scripture say? Verse 3, "'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Now to him that works is the reward not reckoned of grace but of debt." In other words, if he earned it, it wouldn't be grace; it would be something God owed him. "To him that works not, but believes on Him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

So, what Paul says is Abraham wasn't justified by works before God; he was justified by faith. He was justified by grace, justified by faith not works. And he goes on to talk about that in verse 6. He says that David also describes the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputes righteousness apart from works, saying, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord would not impute sin or put sin to his account."

So, in verses 1 to 8, Paul says, "Abraham was justified by faith, not works." Then starting in verse 9, he says, "He was justified by grace, not law." And all the way down through verse 17, he makes the point that Abraham was justified by grace – by grace. Comes to verse 16, "It is of faith, that it might be by grace – by faith and grace." That's his whole emphasis.

First justified by faith. Then the emphasis turns to grace. And in the third section, verse – well, it's about verse 18 and following, he says that he was justified by divine power, not human effort. It's really saying the same thing over and over again. It was God's power. It was God's work in his behalf. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead, verse 24. The whole argument of Romans 4 – and I wish we had more time to spend in it – the whole argument is Abraham was saved by faith, Abraham was saved by grace, Abraham was saved by divine power, not human effort. That is a very strong statement on salvation without works. It is parallel to what we just read in Galatians chapter 3, where it very clearly says that Abraham believed God; he is the father of the faithful – that is those who believe. It says in verse of Galatians 3, Abraham believed God; it was accounted to him for righteousness. And verse 11, “No man is justified by the law. The just shall live” - by what? – “by faith.”

So, you have very clear teaching in Galatians 3, in Romans 4, that Abraham was justified by faith, grace. Grace is God's unmerited favor in graciously giving a man salvation because he believes. And even the faith of that man is a gift of God, according to Ephesians chapter 2.

So, on the one hand, Paul seems to be saying, and rightly is saying, salvation, justification by grace. Here comes James. James says the same man, same illustration: Abraham was justified by works. How do we understand that?

All right, notice Romans 4:2, and let me give you a distinction. It says in Romans 4:2 that Abraham – “If Abraham were justified by works, he would have something to glory about” – in other words, he could pat himself on the back if he made it in by his own works. “But” – but mark this little part of the verse – “not before God.” Now, get this; you cannot be justified by works before God. Mark that. You cannot be justified by works before God; only by faith, and righteousness is then imputed to you, verse 6, verse 11, verse 22, verse 23. You can only be justified by faith, and when you put your faith in God in Christ, God grants you an imputed righteousness; he puts righteousness to your account. The idea is that man is bankrupt – spiritually bankrupt, morally bankrupt. He puts his faith in Christ, and God deposits in his bankrupt account all necessary righteousness to make him suitable to dwell in the presence of God.

Now, this happened to Abraham. In Genesis 15 and verse 3 and following to verse 6. Paul quotes that in the third verse of Romans 4, “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’” In Genesis chapter 15 – listen now carefully – Genesis 15:3 to 6, it says that, “Abraham believed God and righteousness was put to his account.” God deposited righteousness. In the words of Isaiah 61:10, God clothed him with the robe of righteousness. God gave him his righteousness as a gift. Now mark that. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ, righteousness is imputed to you. That is it is deposited to you; you don’t have it; you don’t earn it. You receive it as a gift from God. That’s the marvel of salvation by grace through faith. Like all of us who are bankrupt, we stand before God with nothing in our spiritual account. God, through our faith, acting in response to His sovereign grace, deposits in our account the very righteousness which He possesses, and we stand right with Him.

Abraham experience that. This is the soul condition of salvation. It is said in Genesis 15:6, “He believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

So, Abraham, then, is the father of all who believe, because it was his believing that brought about righteousness. When he believed, God gave him righteousness. That’s just the way it’s always been. Old Testament salvation, New Testament salvation – very same thing. Whether it’s Abraham or you doesn’t matter, it’s all the same. Whether it’s on that side of the cross or this side of the cross, you believe God. What do you have to believe about God? As much as God has revealed about Himself. At whatever point in the unfolding revelation of God a person lived, they were to believe God to the point of that revelation. Abraham obviously didn’t have the New Testament; he didn’t even have the Old Testament. The fullness of God’s revelation was not yet closed. He didn’t enjoy all that we enjoy, but he believed what God had revealed, and that’s the essence of saving faith. There’s no salvation by works.

Back in Romans chapter 3, it says in verse 20, “By the deeds of the law will no flesh be justified in His sight.” On the other hand, it says in verse 24, “Justified freely by His grace.”

So – now mark this – we are made right with God by His grace. He dispenses that grace to us. We respond in believing faith. So, that’s sovereign grace, and we’re saved. No works involved.

You say, “Well, does James believe that?”

Sure he believes it. In fact, in James 2, look at verse 23. In James 2:23, he quotes the very same Scripture. Now follow me on this. “The Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God.

So, James understands that passage in Genesis 15:6, and he understands exactly what it means. He is quoting the very same text Paul quotes in Romans 4. Now listen to what I say to you; Abraham was justified before God. That’s the key idea: before God through faith.

You say, “Well, how could God justify Abraham? How could God he just cover his sins and go forgive him?”

Because Christ would, in the future, die for the sins of Abraham just as Christ, in the past, has died for the sins of every believing person. He believed in the Lord. But when was that in his life? That takes us all the way back to the beginning, when God called him, in Ur of the Chaldees, and said, “Get out of this land, leave your people, and go to a land that I’ll show you,” back in Genesis chapter 12. He was probably about 75 years old at the time of his calling, and he believed God. He picked up everything, left a pagan land, followed his faith in the true God. I don’t know how much revelation he had, probably a very little bit.

But God had sovereignly worked on his heart. There was a response of faith. He started the walk of faith, the life of faith, and at that particular point, he was granted righteousness.

You say, “Well, then what does James mean, when it says here in James, ‘Was not Abraham our father justified by works?’” Listen to this; Abraham was justified by faith before God, but he was justified by works before men. You see the difference? That’s the whole point James is making. Works are the only way his faith can be seen and verified as real saving faith by himself or any other man. The only way I can know I’m genuinely redeemed is to see the pattern of my godliness, the evidence. The only way you can know it is to see my life.

And it is this justification before men that James has in mind. Paul was emphasizing justification before God. James is emphasizing the vindication of a man's claim to salvation before others.

So, it was at Ur of the Chaldees and in the walk of faith that Abraham exhibited that God saw his faith and imputed to him righteousness. But notice what James says; he identifies very specifically when Abraham was justified by works. He says it was when he offered Isaac, his son, on the altar. That's when the whole world could see the reality of his faith. And he, having been justified before God already, was now justified before men. The watching world could perceive the reality of his faith.

Go back to Genesis chapter 22, and let's look briefly at that record. Genesis chapter 22, "It came to pass after these things, that God did test Abraham" – very important; this is a test. A test of what? It's a test of Abraham's faith in order to demonstrate its reality, its genuineness.

He said to him, "Abraham!"

He said, "Here I am."

He said, "Take now your son" – he rubs it in – "your only son" – rubs it in again – "whom you love" – "Take you son, your only son, the son you love. Go to the land of Moriah" – and get this – "offer him there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I'll tell you about." Absolutely unbelievable.

Abraham knows this; he knows that God has made him a promise, and God made him a promise years ago. By this time, Isaac is maybe 10 to 15 years old. This is nearly 50 years after he first believed God. And he's been walking in this promise all these years – somewhere between 40 and 50 years. And God's been saying, "Your seed will be as the sands of the sea, and as the stars of heaven, and I'll make out of your loins a great nation, and whoever blesses them will be blessed, and whoever curses them will be cursed." And Abraham for years is believing this, even though he has no daughter, he has no son, he has no child. He's married to an old lady who's barren.

Finally God gives him a child when he's 100 years old. Now, 10 years later or 15, when he's between 110 and 115, and all he has to look at regarding this promise of a seed as wide as the sand of the sea is one measly kid. [Laughter] And now God comes to him and says, "Take that kid to Mount Moriah and kill him. And everything he knows about the covenant-keeping character of God is violated in his mind. And everything he knows about God's standard of sacrifice is violated, because God has never required human sacrifice, never permitted it. It's murder.

How can God reverse Himself? How can God be un-God? How can God contradict everything about His nature that I know to be true? God says, "Take your son and offer him as a sacrifice."

"But-but-but there's never been a human sacrifice. But-but he's the promise You made. What about Your nature? What about Your truthfulness? What about Your faithfulness? This will violate everything I know to be true about You. This will destroy Your reputation."

What does he do? Does he argue with God? No. Here is the evidence of his faith: no questions asked. "Got up early in the morning" – verse 3 – "saddled his ass, took two of his young men with him, Isaac his son; cut the wood for the burnt offering. Rose up and went to the place which God had told him. Off they go, a couple of young men, Isaac, and the beast of burden carrying the wood.

"On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes, saw the place afar off. Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship'" – mark this in your Bible – "'and come again to you.'" There's his faith.

How's he going to do that? God says, "Go kill the son."

He says, "I'll be back and so will he; we'll come back." Did he believe that? "Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, laid it on Isaac his son, took the fire in his hand and a knife. And they went both of them together.

"Isaac spoke to Abraham his father" – this will tear your heart out – "'My father!' he said.

“Here I am, my son.”

“He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where’s the lamb for a burnt offering?’

“And Abraham said, ‘My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering.’ So they both went together.”

He believed in his heart that whatever the sacrifice would ultimately be, God would provide it. “They came to the place where God had told him. Abraham built an altar, laid the wood in order” – and I can’t imagine the scene behind these two words – “bound Isaac.”

I don’t know whether Isaac just said, “Here I am, tie me up,” or whether there was a little bit of discussion, or whether there was a fight.

But anyway, “Laid him on the altar. Stretched forth his hand and took the knife, ready to plunge it into the heart of his son.

“The angel of the Lord stopped him, cried out of heaven, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’

“And he said, ‘Here I am.’” And he stopped. And you remember the rest of the story: there was a ram caught in the thicket; they sacrificed the ram and away they went. Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord provides.

In Hebrews chapter 11, do you know what it says? It says, “Abraham went all the way, put Isaac on the altar, tied him up, got ready to start the fire, got the knife up to plunge it in his heart because he believed in the God who could raise the dead.” Do you know what I think? It’s my personal opinion that Abraham was a bit disappointed that the angel didn’t let him take the life of his son. Why? Because I think he was ready to see the first resurrection in history. How much faith does it take to believe in something that’s never happened? The closest thing that Abraham ever got to a resurrection was the birth of Isaac out of a dead womb. But that’s a long way. And yet his faith was so strong, he believed that he would take Isaac, take his life; Isaac would come to life; they would come back again and go home. He believed in the God of resurrection to the degree that he was willing to sacrifice the life of his son because he was strong in faith that God would raise him from the dead.

You say, “Why did he believe that God would raise him from the dead?”

Because he believed so unalterably in the character of God, that God was a covenant-keeping God who under no circumstance could ever violate his promise. And that God was a God who when he said he would do something would indeed do it, and everything was based on the life of Isaac. And James says that is where Abraham was justified by works before all the watching world. Yes, justified by faith in believing God, and justified by works in this greatest act of human sacrifice on his part. I don't mean the sacrifice of Isaac; I mean the sacrifice of Abraham. He was a man of great faith all through his life, but it reached the pentacle here.

Now mark this, he wasn't a perfect man. His faith was so weak he lied about Sarah when he was in Egypt to protect her. Right? His faith was so weak that he stupidly went in and had a baby with a handmaid, Hagar, committed adultery, and produced Ishmael, who fathered the Arabs. And that's always been a thorn in the side of the people of God.

No, he wasn't a perfect man, but there was in his life a pattern of believing God that culminated in this incredible act of trust, where he would have taken the life of his son, believing God would raise him from the dead, though there had never been a resurrection to that point.

So, Paul is saying, “Yes, he was justified by grace through faith as recorded in Genesis 15.” And James is saying, “And yes, he was justified before men in Genesis 22 some 40 plus years later.”

By the way, just to support that perspective, the aorist indicative verb “was justified” has two general meanings. And I did a study of this, because I was curious about it. When it says in verse 21, “He was justified by works,” the word “justified” has two general meanings. Number one, it means to acquit or to treat as righteous. Number two, it means to vindicate, to show, or to demonstrate as righteous. How interesting.



Definition number one is what Paul uses in Romans 4, “He was acquitted, treated, and described as righteous.” Definition number two is what James uses; he was vindicated, shown, and demonstrated to be righteous in the act of a willingness to sacrifice his son.

So, he concludes in verse 22; look at it; “Do you see, then, how faith was cooperating with his works?” Do you see that? There was no antagonism, beloved; that’s the point. There’s no argument; there’s no debate. Works support the reality of saving faith. Where you have a man who has imputed righteousness, you have a man who has manifest righteousness. Where you have a man who is made just before God, you have a man who will be made just before men. Where you have a man who has received righteousness, you will have a man who will show that righteousness. That’s Paul and James put together.

And the end of verse 22, “By works was faith brought to its goal, brought to its end, brought to its fullness.” That’s the idea of the “made perfect.” It isn’t that salvation was imperfect. It isn’t that its faith plus works to be saved. It isn’t that the faith is part of it, and then later on the works are part of the salvation. It’s like a tree. A tree is a tree, and a tree is a tree that is alive, and it has all the principles of life, but it isn’t perfected until it bears fruit.

And so, a man is redeemed, and he has pulsing in him the life of God and the pulse of divine principle beating within him, pumping divine and righteous life through him, but that’s not brought to its goal until he produces the fruit. It’s there it has to be seen. Faith then reaches its goal in works. Justification before God is manifest in justification before men. Not only was Abraham’s faith fulfilled in his works, but look at verse 23, “And the Scripture was also fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.’” And there, as I said, he quoted Genesis 15:6. The reality of that truth was demonstrated now, made manifest.

The Scripture said, “Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness.” The Scripture said that, and now what the Scripture said has been made visible in his works demonstrated. Righteousness was put to his account, and righteousness was declared.

The word “fulfilled” does not make this a prophesy. It’s a very broad word. It has broad possibilities. It simply means that that which was true about Abraham was brought to fruition, brought to fulfillment. And anyone – I say it again – genuinely saved will demonstrate it in

life behavior. And a wonderful result came about. Look at the end of verse 23, “He was called the friend of God.” He was called the co-partner with the Holy One. What a thought. Apparently, by the way, that title of intimacy, that title of sweet communion with God was the result of his obedience. It was the result of Genesis 22. It was the result of his outworking, genuine, spiritual character, because he is never called the friend of God in Genesis; he is never called the friend of God prior to Genesis 22. Not until 2 Chronicles 20 verse 7, and Isaiah 41:8 is Abraham called the friend of God, and he’s called the friend of God in both of those Scriptures.

In 2 Chronicles 20:7, it says, “Abraham Thy friend” – speaking of God; and in Isaiah 41:8, God speaks and says, “Abraham My friend.” The Septuagint says, “Abraham, whom I love.” What a dignity, what an honor, and what a joy. Because his faith was manifest and proven to be real, he entered into that wonderful arena of people who are called the friend of God.

You say, “Who are the friends of God?”

Jesus put it this way in John 15, “You are My friends if you do whatsoever I command you.” You’re a friend of God. That’s a title reserved for people who obey God, who obey His Word.

So, the principle’s very simple, really. Justified, manifest of that justification, he became known as one who was intimate with God. How do you know a true Christian? You look at their life, and you say, “He is a friend of God.”

How do you know?

“I can tell the way he lives. I can tell the way he acts. I can tell the way he thinks. I can tell the way he speaks. I can tell the way he behaves. He is intimate with God.”

As John Calvin put it, “Fait alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone. Never.”

So, James then simply says, in verse 24, summing it up, “You see, then, that by works a man is justified also and not by faith only. That’s only part of it. It’s not enough to just have faith. There must be faith and the resultant works. So, we could say it this way, that by works a

man is vindicated; not by faith only. So, Abraham is a classic illustration of salvation by faith before God, and salvation made evident before men.

The second illustration in verse 25, note this very, very carefully. It is a powerful contrast. Now, think with me on this. James chooses another person because she is so remarkably unlike Abraham. Get this; Abraham was a Jew; Rahab was a Gentile. Abraham's a man; Rahab is a woman. Abraham is a good man; Rahab is an evil woman. Abraham a noble Chaldean; Rahab a degraded Canaanite. Abraham a great leader; Rahab a common follower. Abraham at the top of the social order; Rahab at the bottom. I mean every possible contrast. Abraham the beneficiary of much divine leadership and divine guidance; Rahab a total pagan. Abraham having received direct revelation from God; Rahab having only received very indirect revelation about God.

And yet, when you come to Hebrews 11 and the list of the heroes of faith, Abraham is there, and so is Rahab. And when you go to Matthew chapter 1, and you read the genealogy of Jesus, Abraham is there, and so is Rahab. Believe it or not, the Messiah came through the loins of Rahab the harlot.

Verse 25, "In like manner" – I love those words; that's a knockout punch, one word in the Greek homoios – "In the same way as Abraham, also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?" In like manner, didn't this woman of the worst kind demonstrate her true salvation by what she did? Was not the harlot justified by works?

Now listen very carefully. Again you must make the same twofold feature in understanding this very important account. Just briefly, I want to touch base with it. I don't want you to spend a lot of time on it, because we don't have the time. But let me just mention to you, from Joshua chapter 2, a couple of things about the story of Rahab. Rahab was a harlot living in Jericho. She ran an inn, and inns were brothels, and she had women in her inn to sleep with men, and that was how she made her living.

So, into the land has come the wonderful people of God en masse, and they are there because God's going to give them Canaan. They arrive at Jericho; they're obviously going to take Jericho. They send some spies in to spy out the city and see what's there. The spies go in;

they stay in an inn. The inn is owned by Rahab. Rahab is a harlot. They're not there for those purposes; they're simply there to lodge. This woman then takes in these spies.

When she gets the spies there and, obviously, finds out who they are, verse 9, "She said to the men, 'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed.

"And as soon as we heard these things, our heart did melt. Neither did there remain any more courage in any man because of you, for" – listen – "the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and in earth beneath."

Now, when that woman believed that, she was justified before God. She believed that God was the true God. She believed that God was the God of miracles who had led His people out of Egypt. She believed that God was the God of power who had defeated the Amorite kings. She believed all she knew about God, the true God, and it was imputed to her for righteousness. In that point she was justified by her faith.

That faith justification was then made manifest, James says, verse 25, when she received the messengers and sent them out another way to protect them from the soldiers who would have taken their life. So again, it's the same idea. This woman believed the truth. Then it was imputed to her for righteous by her faith, and then that righteousness was vindicated by the action she took to save the life of those spies. By the way, you remember what she did? She told a lie, didn't she?

People say, "Was that right?"

Well, of course it wasn't right. But she's a pagan, coming out of a pagan culture, with pagan ethics, who doesn't understanding the premium God puts on truth. She working with whatever knowledge she's got. It's very limited. She's got a little paganism still mixed up with her true faith, not unlike all the rest of us. And her ethics are the ethics of a corrupt, vile, degraded, debauched, Canaanite society about to be wiped out by God.

So, we don't justify the lie she told. She did that as a part of her own environmental understanding because she was a victim of the fallenness of her own nature. The time would come when she would understand the value that God puts on truth, and she would trust in God instead of in her own ability to get out of things. But here was a woman, basically, who was in the pit of moral muck. She sold her body for sexual favors as a Canaanite. She had succumbed to the prevailing immorality of her environment. She believes in the true God. It's accounted to her for righteousness.

Now watch this; when given the opportunity, the only opportunity she ever had in her life to do something, to demonstrate her faith in God, she put her life on the line. If she had been found out, it would have cost her her life. She hid the spies in the flax on the roof. She let them escape. She told the guys that came to find them that they weren't there. She told them how to escape, the whole thing. She protected herself, put a cord in the window, said, "When you come back, save me and my family; we want to be a part of the community of people that worship the true God." She demonstrated her faith by works. Her lie was unnecessary. Who knows what God might have done to spare her if she hadn't done that?

Now, I want to conclude these two illustrations; listen carefully. As I sat back in my desk this week and thought about these two illustrations, it really began to overwhelm me. What kind of works vindicate true salvation? Going to church? No, it doesn't say, "And she went over and worshipped God. It doesn't say of Abraham that he built an altar and worshipped God. In both cases, the visible vindication of their justification as putting their life and their dreams and their hopes on the line. That is the kind of work that I believe God wants us to understand is demonstrated in true faith. It isn't that you went to church, read a Bible, sang a song. It is that you are so supremely committed to God that you would sacrifice your hopes and dreams and ambitions, and yes, you would risk your own life to be true to your faith. That's the issue.

Jesus put it this way, "If you're not willing to take up your cross" – and what was that? An emblem of death, an emblem of painful death, an emblem of excruciating death – "and follow Me, you're not worthy to be My disciple." The issue is not do you go to church, do you read your Bible, do you have a little spiritual activity? The issue is when it comes down to the crux of why you live and what is valuable, your faith in God is more valuable to you than everything you hold most dear, and you'll put your own life on the line; you'll put all your

dreams and hopes on the line because you have such implicit and total trust in Him. That's the issue. That's the kind of evidence that is monumental.

Don't tell me a person's faith is real because they come to Bible study. You don't know that. See them in the vortex of a life choice. How many times have you seen people come to the Bible study, and some guy comes along that looks good and blinks the eyes properly and has a new Porsche, and they go off with an unbeliever. And they sacrifice everything that they once held dear because what they really hold dear has nothing to do with divine things.

Or the person who does very well living for Christ until it costs them their family or their job or whatever. Or until the Lord sort of puts a responsibility on them that's going to cost them some of their material values. Or maybe it's something that might even be a direction in life that will move them away from what their ambition has always been. They say no to that, and they reach out for the things they really love. Yes, it's in the vortex of the dire decisions of life, where hopes and dreams and destiny and ambition and life itself is on the line that true faith always reveals itself. And the fact of the matter is, if you never get into that vortex, sad to say, some people might go through the world self-deceived until the very time they meet the Lord. What a tragedy.

And James then concludes with a final analogy. Abraham, Rahab, and finally the analogy of a corpse. Very vivid. "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." Just as, even so – hspcr, houts. Just as, even so; it's an analogy. And in both cases, if the second member is missing, the result is death. If the spirit is missing from the body – death. If works are missing from faith – death. A body without the divinely imparted life is nothing but a stinking, putrefying, rotting corpse. Believe me, get it out of here. A body without life is putrid. It has absolutely no value. It ought to be put in the ground and covered up with dirt or it'll rot everything it touches. And so is belief without behavior, just as putrid, just as decaying, just as loathsome. Just as dead.

So, James is really saying, "Look at yourself." What about you? Do you have a belief without behavior? Do you believe but not obey? Do you say you believe? Are you orthodox, but you don't long to serve God? You don't love him to the point where whatever it may cost you, you're willing to pay that price because He is supremely dear to you. Do you say you love Him? Do you say you care about Him? Do you say you believe in Him but do you love sin?

Do you court unrighteousness, or do you loathe evil, loathe pride, seek humility? Is your faith useless, or is it saving faith? That's the question James wants to ask; the test of living faith.

It is in the direst moment of life's exigencies, when everything is at the crossroads. Do you choose to honor God no matter what the cost? Abraham did. Rahab did. Their faith was alive.