

a herd of swine.<sup>1</sup> Or when Yeshua cast out demons from the man in the Capernaum Synagogue.<sup>2</sup> Here is yet another example of how the Apostolic Scriptures affirm the divine nature of Yeshua, for they trembled at being confronted by Yeshua and had no power against Him. Or to put it another way, how do we know that the “demons also believe, and shudder”? Because they trembled and were banished by the command of Yeshua who is Himself God in the flesh.

**20–21 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?**

Once again, James reiterates his primary point, that “faith without works is dead,” though here he substitutes “useless” (*ἀργός*, *argos*), a word that carries the sense of “idle, lazy, unproductive, useless, worthless.”<sup>3</sup> And he addresses his words to the “foolish fellow” who has been the one whom James has set forth in his explanatory “interchange” with an opponent who disagrees with James’ primary emphasis that true faith and works always go together. The one who thinks they can have true faith without demonstrating that faith by their life is foolish indeed, for they have entirely neglected the clear teaching of the Scriptures. And it is to Abraham that James turns as proof.

It is in this verse (v. 21) that the statement of James has been misunderstood and taken out of context, so much so that Luther himself considered the Epistle of James to not have been written by an apostle and as not worthy to be considered Scripture. Luther wrote regarding the epistle of James:

But to state my own opinion about it . . . I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows. First: Flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works...<sup>4</sup>

St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.<sup>5</sup>

1 Cf. Matt 8:28ff; Mk 5:2ff.

2 Cf. Mk 1:21ff; Lk 4:31ff.

3 *BDAG*, “*ἀργός*,” p. 128.

4 *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), p. 362.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 397.

But what Luther and others missed in James' claim that "Was not Abraham our father justified by works" is that he is referring to Abraham being "justified" in the sight of men, not God. For the Scriptures are clear that Abraham was justified before God, i.e., declared "not guilty" on the basis of his faith in the promised redeemer Who would pay the penalty of sin for all whom He would redeem. James will use Gen 15:6 in v. 23 as the very foundation for his statement that Abraham was justified by works.

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. :וְהֵאֱמַן בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה: (Gen 15:6)

The primary issue in understanding the importance of this text is to discover to what the word "it" refers in the phrase "and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." The Hebrew is very clear in providing an answer, for the verb חָשַׁב, "to account, reckon" has a feminine singular objective pronoun attached: וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ, *vayachsheveha*, and it is this pronoun that is translated "it" in our English bibles. Without getting too involved in Hebrew grammar, the important point to make is that the gender of a pronoun must match that to which it refers. In this Genesis text, the closest antecedent is the obvious noun "faith" as indicated by the verb "he believed." The word "faith" in Hebrew, אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*) is feminine in gender. Thus, the Hebrew is clear that what was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness was his faith in the coming Promised One, Yeshua.

To properly interpret the statement of James, that "Abraham our father was justified by faith," one must do so within the context in which he states this. And what is the context? That a person who has been given true, saving faith will evidence this by living in obedience to God and His revealed will. Thus, when James states that "Abraham...was justified by works," he is not referring to gaining right-standing before God, but rather as demonstrating his true faith by obeying God in the most difficult of requirements, the willingness to even offer Isaac as a sacrifice as God commanded. By his willingness to do so he demonstrated to those people who knew him that his faith was real. In short, he proved to the people of his family and community that he was a man of faith, that is, he "justified" his faith in God to them by obeying Him even when to do so required more than what any father could be expected to give. The writer to the Hebrews gives us an added insight into the genuine nature of Abraham's faith when he writes:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, “IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED.” He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Heb 11:17–19)

What gave Abraham strength to carry out this most difficult commandment given to him was his faith in God, that He is able to overcome death by the power of resurrection and that He would do so because God is holy and always keeps His promises.

**22–23 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God.**

Now James applies the illustration to his main thesis, that genuine faith always produces works of righteousness. But notice how he pairs faith and works in this text. He states: “faith was working [together] with his works” (ἡ πίστις συνήργει τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ). The Greek *συνεργέω* (*sunergeō*) carries the sense of “to engage in cooperative endeavor, work together with, assist, help.”<sup>1</sup> James’ meaning is obvious: by faith the child of God desires to obey and honor Him, and the more such works characterize the believer, the more he or she is able to obey the Lord, for a life of obedience creates spiritual strength by which the flesh is more and more overcome and submission to God becomes the common pattern.

...*faith was perfected* – This is what James means when he teaches us that “faith was perfected” in Abraham. The word “perfected” (τελειόω, *teleiōō*) pictures “bringing something to its goal,” or “realizing an expected accomplishment.”<sup>2</sup> Abraham grew in faith through obeying God, even in the most difficult of situations. Thus, James is teaching us here that genuine, saving faith grows stronger through the exercise of obedience to God. Manton puts it this way:

...faith working together with obedience is made perfect—that is, bettered and improved, just as our inner vigor is improved by physical exercise. In short, works do not complete

1 BDAG, “συνεργέω,” p. 969.

2 Ibid., “τελειόω,” p. 996.

faith by communicating their perfection to it but by stirring its own vigor.<sup>1</sup>

...and he was called the friend of God. – Here, once again, James gives us a clear explanation of what he means when he writes that “Abraham our father was justified by works.” He was justified in the eyes of those who witnessed his faith and not only those who were in his own generation. For it must have become a common thing to refer to Abraham as “the friend of God,” since it was not until Isaiah gave his prophecy and the historian penned 2Chronicles that the phrase “the friend of God” became forever established as the statement of Scripture.

But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend, you whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts and said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you. (Is 41:8–9)

Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever? (2Chr 20:7)

## **24 – You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.**

That Abraham would be called “the friend of God” labels him as a man of true faith. That this epitaph became eternally embedded in Scripture demonstrates the very lesson James is teaching: Abraham’s faith was justified or seen as genuine by his righteous works, that is, obeying God even in the most difficult of situations. God looks at the heart and knows those who stand justified, declared righteous, by faith in Yeshua. Man sees one’s works, and only works of righteousness are the inevitable fruit of faith.

James is simply reiterating what Yeshua Himself taught:

So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (Matt 7:17–20)

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<sup>1</sup> Manton, *James*, p. 254.

**25–26 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.**

James now comes to the conclusion of this section, giving a second illustration of his main thesis, that the person who claims to “have faith” but whose life does not manifest the born-again life that saving faith inevitably produces, has no true faith at all. And James does so by pointing to the story of the spies who were sent by Joshua to spy out the land, and especially to the city of Jericho (Joshua 2:1ff). It seems very possible that James chose this example because of the stark contrast in the transformation of the life of Rahab.

James first identifies Rahab (רַחַב, *rachav*) as “the prostitute” (ἡ πόρνη, *hē pornē*). The use of the article “the” could most likely be understood as “the well-known prostitute,” pointing to the primary life-style for which she was known, and thus in stark contrast to Abraham in the previous verses of our text.

It is clear that Rahab and her people had been informed about God’s miraculous works on behalf of Israel. When talking with the spies sent by Joshua, she mentions the crossing of the Red Sea, the victory over the Amorites and their kings, Sihon and Og, and she knew that Adonai had given Israel the victory as they entered the land. Moreover, her own testimony indicates that she had confessed the God of Israel to be the true God above all others, for she states:

for Adonai your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. (Josh 2:11)

But it was not merely her words that evidenced her true confession that the God of Israel was the true and almighty God, for she not only received the Israeli spies [here called “messengers” (ἄγγελοι, *angeloi*)] into her house, but she hid them from those who were seeking to put them to death, but also aided their escape. It seems obvious that she did so knowing well that if her actions were made know to the officials of her city, it would have surely resulted in her execution.

Thus, she put her life in the hands of the God Who had proven Himself to be the Sovereign God, both in heaven and upon the earth. Further, as the biblical narrative makes clear, she fully believed that the God of Israel had given the land into their hands, and that they would surely conquer the city in which she lived. The putting of the scarlet

thread in her window as the marker to spare herself and her family when Israel entered to take the city was proof that she fully expected God to give Israel the victory.

Remarkably, Rahab became a wife of Salman and is listed in the genealogy given by Matthew as in the line of Yeshua (Matt 1:5). Furthermore, she is included in the “Hall of Faith” by the author of Hebrews:

By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace. (Heb 11:31)

In choosing Rahab to illustrate the character of true faith, James has clearly given us one “from the nations,” emphasizing that saving faith is known to be possessed by someone whose life continues to be marked by righteousness, the mark of being saved by God’s grace both for Jew and for Gentile.

*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.* – In the final verse of our chapter (v. 26), James gives a succinct and clear reiteration of his main point in this paragraph, and uses the contrast of life and death. Clearly a human body in which there is no breath is declared to be dead.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, anyone who claims to have faith in God and the eternal redemption He has made through Yeshua, but whose life is not marked by a growing character of righteousness, is not alive in the Messiah but remains “dead in trespasses and sin.” Thus we see that James and Paul are in full agreement.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. (Eph 2:1–2)

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (Col 2:13–14)

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<sup>1</sup> We should remember that the Hebrew word רוּחַ, *ruach*, can also carry the sense of “breath” (for example, see Gen 6:17; 7:22).