

# Faith That Works



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *James 2:14–26; Rom. 3:27, 28; Titus 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:2; Rom. 4:1–5; Josh. 2:1–21.*

**Memory Text:** “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (*James 2:26, NKJV*).

He was a successful doctor and an elder in a high-profile church of several hundred members. He was a major giver to the church's big projects, and his generosity encouraged others to be more sacrificial. The doctor was also a great preacher. When the pastor was gone, he spoke, and everyone looked forward to his messages, which were theologically deep, heartfelt, and spiritual.

Then one day the truth came out. The doctor's absence at church the previous Sabbath had not been because he was on vacation, as many had thought. No, he was found dead in his beachfront condo from an overdose of recreational narcotics.

Worse was the shocking revelation that in his bedroom were dozens of pornographic videos and magazines. The church was devastated, especially the young people, who had looked up to him as a role model. Though we must leave all judgment in God's hands, the doctor's actions certainly call into question the reality of his faith.

The point? Though we are saved by faith, we cannot separate faith and works in the life of a Christian, a crucial but often misunderstood truth expounded upon in the book of James.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 8.

## Dead Faith

**“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?”** (*James 2:14, NKJV*). **How do we understand this verse in the context of salvation by faith alone?** *Read James 2:15–17; compare Rom. 3:27, 28; Eph. 2:8, 9.*

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Faith without works. James 2:15, 16 gives a vivid illustration of this kind of phony faith. As we have already seen, obedience in the book of James is relational. So, how do we relate to a brother or sister in the church who is in need? Words are not enough. We cannot simply say, “Go in peace. God will provide,” when God has provided us the means to help that brother or sister.

Of course, needs can be endless, and we cannot meet them all. But there is a principle called “the power of one.” We are the hands and feet of Jesus, and we can help others one person at a time. In fact, that is how Jesus usually worked. In Mark 5:22–34, a man whose daughter was dying appealed to Him for help. On the way, a woman approached from behind and touched Jesus’ garment. After the healing, Jesus could have gone on and the woman would have left rejoicing. But Jesus knew that she needed more than physical healing. So, He stopped and took the time so that she could learn to be a witness for Jesus, to share as well as to receive. Then He said the same words we have in James 2:16, NIV: “Go in peace” (*Mark 5:34, NIV*). But, unlike the words in James, in this case, they actually meant something!

When we recognize a need but do nothing about it, we have missed an opportunity of exercising faith. By doing so, our faith gets a little weaker and a little deader. This is because faith without works dies. James describes it even more starkly: faith is dead already. If it were alive, the works would be there. If they are not, what good is it? At the end of verse 14, James asks a question about this kind of workless and worthless faith. It comes across far more strongly in Greek than it does in most translations: “That faith cannot save him, can it?” The answer James expects us to give is clearly “No.”

**How can we learn to better express our faith through our works while protecting ourselves from the deception that our works save us?**

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## Saving Faith

**Read** James 2:18. What is the main point James is making? How do we show our faith by our works?

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James uses a common rhetorical technique whereby a potential objector comes forward. In this case, the objector tries to drive a wedge between faith and works by suggesting that as long as a person has one or the other, he or she is fine. But the whole point James is trying to make is that Christians cannot hope to be saved by faith if there are no corresponding works: “Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (*vs. 18, NKJV*).

The key point is that not just any faith will save. Genuine faith, *sav-*  
*ing* faith, is characterized by good works. Likewise, works are only good works if they spring from faith. Faith and works are inseparable. Like two sides of a coin, one cannot exist without the other. Also like a coin, one side is the head and the other the tail. Faith comes first and then leads the way to corresponding works.

**Consider** Paul’s attitude toward works in Ephesians 2:10, 1 Thesalonians 1:3, 1 Timothy 5:25, and Titus 2:14. Why are good works so important?

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Paul was not against good works per se. He was against works as a means of salvation (*see Gal. 2:16*). In fact, Paul said that those who rely on works of the law to be saved are under a curse, because no one who tries to be saved by keeping the law actually succeeds in keeping it (*Gal. 3:10*). Obedience is possible only through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“If man cannot, by any of his good works, merit salvation, then it must be wholly of grace, received by man as a sinner because he receives and believes in Jesus. It is wholly a free gift. Justification by faith is placed beyond controversy. And all this controversy is ended, as soon as the matter is settled that the merits of fallen man in his good works can never procure eternal life for him.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 20.

**Why should the great news that we cannot work our way to heaven motivate us, out of a love for God, to do all the good works that we can?**

## The “Faith” of Demons

If works are absent, there is only one other way to “prove” the genuineness of one’s faith: by orthodoxy. If I believe the right things, then I must have faith, right?

**Read** 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Timothy 2:4; James 5:19, 20; 1 Peter 1:22; and 1 John 3:18, 19. What do these verses tell us about how important knowing truth is?

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There is no question that an intellectual knowledge of truth has its place, a very important place. Yet, that knowledge, in and of itself, is not sufficient to prove that a person has saving faith.

**What** warning is given to us in James 2:19 about a false concept of what true faith is?

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The most fundamental statement of faith in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 6:4: “ ‘Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!’ ” (*NASB*). Known as the *Shema* (because this is the Hebrew word it begins with), this verse neatly summarizes belief in one God. Every other biblical teaching flows from this cardinal truth.

But even the demons believe this truth. In fact, they know it! And yet, what good does it do them? They tremble in God’s presence, as they did also when confronted by Jesus and commanded by Him to come out of their victims (*Mark 3:11, 5:7*).

An intellectual faith that has no effect on how we act is useless; in fact, it is the same faith that demons have, demons who are actively at work to deceive us with false doctrines and lies. As with Israel at the time of Jesus, demons will encourage people to believe their deceptions based on their victims’ desires to hold on to impure and unrighteous behavior: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils” (*1 Tim. 4:1*).

Faith must be manifested in our lives or else it is not saving faith; it is, instead, “the faith of demons,” and such a faith won’t save us any more than it will save them.

## Abraham's Faith

**Read** James 2:21–24 and compare it with Romans 4:1–5, 22–24. How is the faith of Abraham described in these texts, and on what is justification based?

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Interestingly, both James and Paul quote Genesis 15:6, but they seem to arrive at opposite conclusions. According to James, Abraham was justified by works, but Paul seems, in Romans 4:2, to deny this possibility explicitly (*compare vs. 24*).

However, the immediate context of Romans 4 has to do with whether circumcision is necessary for justification; that is, whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be saved (*Rom. 3:28–30*). Paul shows that Abraham's faith, not his "work" of being circumcised, was the basis of justification, because Abraham believed even before he was circumcised. Abraham was circumcised later as an outward sign of his inward faith (*Rom. 4:9–11*). But works alone, even circumcision, are not sufficient for justification, because only those "who also walk in the steps of that faith [of] our father Abraham" (*Rom. 4:12, NKJV*) will be justified.

Is this emphasis really so different from that of James? Paul even goes on to use the same "proof" of Abraham's faith that James does (*see Rom. 4:17–21*). Abraham believed God could resurrect Isaac because He "gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist" (*vs. 17, NASB; compare Heb. 11:17–19*). Paul also defines saving faith as "being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform" (*Rom. 4:21, NKJV*). In short, faith that trusts God to keep His promises and obediently relies on His word is saving faith. These works are not "works of law" but "works of faith." Or, as James puts it: "Do you see that *faith was working* together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" (*2:22, NKJV; emphasis added*).

Many stress the importance of faith and works, but even this separates the two, at least to some extent. True faith is "faith working through love" (*Gal. 5:6, NKJV*). Good works are not just the outward sign of faith; they are the *outworking* of faith. Abraham's faith in the God who created all life motivated him to obey God in offering up his only son, Isaac. According to James, it is by obedience that faith is made perfect.

**What is your own experience with how works (or the lack thereof) impact your faith?**

## The Faith of Rahab

“Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?” (*James 2:25, NKJV*). Read *Joshua 2:1–21*. How do we understand this example, again in the context of salvation by faith alone?

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According to Hebrews 11:31, the inhabitants of Jericho did not believe. Most modern translations describe them as being “disobedient.” The inhabitants of Jericho knew about Israel’s signal victories over the Midianites and the Amorites, so they were well aware of the power of Israel’s God. God’s judgment on Israel at Baalpeor taught the people in Jericho of His holiness as well as His abhorrence of idolatry and immorality: “All these events were known to the inhabitants of Jericho, and there were many who shared Rahab’s conviction, though they refused to obey it.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 492.

Rahab was not saved because of her dishonesty but in spite of it. She believed in the true God, and she acted on that faith by protecting the spies that Joshua sent out. There were also conditions: she obeyed the messengers’ direction to hang the scarlet cord out her window, which was reminiscent of the blood sprinkled around the doorposts of the Israelite homes at the time of their Passover deliverance (*see Exod. 12:21–24*). While far from perfect, Rahab’s life is a model of faith that shows the reality of God’s forgiveness and grace for everyone willing to step out in faith and to trust God with the results.

**Read James 2:26.** How does this text summarize the relationship between faith and works?

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Just as the body is only a corpse without the breath of life, so faith without works is dead. In addition, without real faith any “obedience” we might try to render would only amount to “dead works” (*Heb. 6:1, 9:14*), which are meaningless in the sight of God.

**A harlot saved by faith? If that were the only example of salvation by faith we had, what false conclusions could we draw from it? Nevertheless, what hope can you take from her story for yourself?**

**Further Study:** “When self is put entirely away, then you can obtain a new and rich experience, you will discern your own imperfections as you lie low at the foot of the cross, and as you view the perfections of Christ, self will sink into insignificance.

“Christ will appear to the discerning eye the perfection of attractive loveliness; then His mould will be upon mind and heart, and will be revealed in the character. The impress of the divine mind should be made upon the heart, and manifested in the life. Come to Jesus in your need, pray in living faith, hold fast to the hand of divine power, believe, only believe, and you will see the salvation of God. If you will be taught, God will teach you; if you will be led, He will lead you to fountains of living waters.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Southern Africa*, p. 26.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read over James 2 in one quick sitting. What is the essential message there for those who trust only in the merits of Christ’s righteousness for their salvation?
- 2 Some argue that James talks about faith and works without reference to Paul, and that we should interpret James on his own terms. What’s wrong with that kind of thinking? Why, especially in this case, is it important to keep in mind what other texts say about faith and works? In fact, in the heat of the Protestant Reformation, Catholic apologists often ran to the book of James to defend the Roman Church against the Protestants. Why does this show us how important it is to build our doctrines on all the texts we have at our disposal?
- 3 It is often said that faith and works should be kept in “balance.” In light of this lesson, do you agree with that statement? Discuss your answer with others in the class.
- 4 Why do we find no mention in James (or the rest of the New Testament) of Abraham’s failure of faith in connection with Ishmael or about Rahab’s lying? What does this fact teach us about what it means to be covered by Christ’s righteousness?

## By Faith I See

Told to ENOCH IGLESIAS by VICTOR VERGARA

I was born into a poor family in a town north of Medellín, Colombia. Our poverty carved out a hard life for us. Our town has no adequate water supply, no electricity, no telephone. Our houses are made of mud pressed over bamboo poles, because we have no other building materials.

When travelers pass by, they wonder how we stay alive. Everyone looks hungry. Even the dogs are skin and bones. My village knows only hunger, hard work, sickness, and disease.

When I was little, I played in the hills around our home. When I was 11, I began to help and work with the family. We harvested sweet potatoes and plantains, a type of banana. I also herded cows.

One year a sickness spread throughout our village. It was so contagious that doctors wouldn't come to treat us. I became sick but recovered. However, I noticed a change in my vision—everything looked yellow, then became blurry. Finally, I lost my sight completely.

Sounds became my way of “seeing.” I listened to my uncle's battery-powered television and learned that life wasn't so hard in other places. That reality made me even more miserable. I hated my life of trouble and pain.

Fortunately, my mother was a Seventh-day Adventist, and her faith was strong. As I gradually lost my vision, her faith became my strength. She taught me to trust God. At age 15, two years after I became blind, I was baptized.

I enrolled in a school for blind students for six months, and then returned to my regular school. It took me longer to finish my studies, but I kept at it.

During the summer I worked as a literature evangelist. My cousin guided me from door to door, and I talked to the people about the hope they could find in Jesus. I chose to work in the poor neighborhoods, because I thought there would be many people who needed God and hope. They did want my books, and they were glad to know that they were helping me too.

When I was younger, I was angry and bitter because of my family's poverty. Then when I became blind I became more angry and bitter, and wondered why all of these bad things were happening to me. Several doctors examined my eyes, and I have even had surgery; but they could not restore my eyesight.

Now I see by faith. When I learned to trust God, I realized that He does not guarantee an easy life. But He does promise to walk with us during our earthly life, and if we are faithful, He will guarantee an eternal life.

Several people have asked to study the Bible with me. They want to get to know Jesus and share His power just as I have. If it takes my blindness to win others to Jesus, then I want to be a good example so that others may see Jesus through my faith.

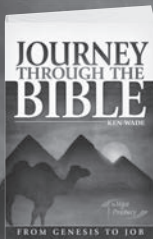
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VICTOR VERGARA was in his second year of studying theology at Colombia Adventist University in Medellín at the time of this writing.

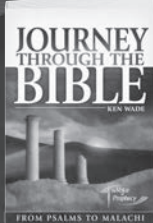


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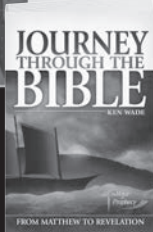
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