

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Theme: "The Testing of Your Faith"

Lesson: 19 Text: 2:21-26 Date: 7-16-23

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TEXT AND STUDY NOTES



(21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; (23) and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham **believed God**, and it was counted to him as righteousness"-- and he was called a **friend of God**.

(Gen 15:6; 22:9-12; 2 Chr 20:7; Is 41:8; Mt 11:19; 12:33-37; Rom 4:3; Gal 2:15,16; 3:6; 5:6; 1 Th 1:3; Heb 11:17)

(24) You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

(25) And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

(26) For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

(Gen 2:7; Josh 2:1-22; Mt 1:5; Heb 11:31)

Commentary on James – "The Epistle of Faith" – Dr. David Scaer - CPH

Abraham's Faith and Sacrifice (2:20-22)

James handles the case of Abraham at slightly greater length. The original justification of Abraham in his being called by God and his acceptance of that call (Gen. 12:1-4) is manifested to all when he so submits himself to God that he is willing to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22). James wants his audience to see Abraham's entire life, and not simply one deed, as a manifestation of his faith. Abraham's faith meant a life of obedience. God was putting Abraham's faith to the test between the time when he was first called and his offering up of his son Isaac, a period of some 30 years. The Abraham story in Genesis then quickly comes to a close with the death of Sarah (ch. 23), obtaining a bride for Isaac (ch. 24), and his remarriage and death (25:1-11). James' use of Abraham, who waited long for the fulfillment, fits perfectly the opening theme of the epistle to remain faithful under suffering even when it appears that God has deserted the church. At this point James alludes to Christ's sacrificial death.

On Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac it has been observed that "Jews implore the mercy of God by the sacrifice of Abraham, as Christians by the sacrifice of Christ." The word used for altar (*thusiastērion*) is the same as that used for Jewish ritual sacrifice and for the altar associated with Christ, the sacrificial Lamb, in the Book of Revelation (14:18). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of reconciliation with the brother before offering the gift at the altar (Matt. 5:23-24). Atonement is not a developed theme in James, but the use of the word "altar" suggests a common awareness of it. The altar existed in the Jewish cult to proclaim the need for atonement before reconciliation. In the case of Abraham it was not he but God who provided the lamb for the sacrifice (Gen. 22:13-14). The altar was at the center of Jewish worship, and James' use of the word would by itself suggest atonement and sacrifice.

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is viewed as the fulfillment of Gen. 15:6: "[Abraham] believed the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." James' claim that "the Scripture was fulfilled" could raise a question, since the Scriptures would only come into existence some centuries after Abraham. Superficially it would mean that they were written after they were fulfilled. For James Scripture is of such high authority that it becomes personified as God's living voice. Paul follows the same procedure in Gal. 3:8: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham." So similar is Paul to James that it seems certain that Paul is here using James. Gen. 15:6 is a Mosaic editorial notation, written centuries later, that Abraham's faith was considered as righteousness before God. Now James observes that in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac God was vindicated in having justified him. Abraham was justified before the sacrifice took place, but the sacrifice proved it.⁷

There is no explicit Scripture which refers to the occasion when Abraham was called God's friend, though Abraham's close association with God is beyond dispute. The Septuagint in handling Gen. 18:17, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" calls Abraham "God's child," and Philo in citing this calls him "God's friend." Jehoshaphat calls him "God's friend" (2 Chron. 20:7). In the New Testament John the Baptist calls himself "the friend of the bridegroom" (John 3:29). James will later warn against being a friend of the world and an enemy of God (4:4).

The Superior Faith of Rahab (2:25)

The inclusion of Rahab as an example of works by James would be less problematical if the congregation addressed were facing the crisis of Gentile Christians in their services. But there is no evidence for this. Outside of the reference to Rahab there is no hint that James is at all concerned about Gentiles entering the congregations. The inclusion of Gentiles in the church was later a major problem for Christian Jews, but it does not seem one at this time. Matthew in writing the genealogy of Jesus included her with Ruth, though women are usually not included in Jewish genealogies. In Matthew's gospel Rahab and Ruth are included because as Gentiles they are examples of those who believe the message which was intended for the Jews and not for them. They are prototypes of the Canaanite woman who believed in Jesus, even though He explicitly stated that His ministry did not embrace her (Matt. 15:22-28). Rahab is the ancestress of David and part of the Messianic line leading to Jesus. Matthew's message is that Gentiles have always had a place in God's plan of salvation.

Abraham is an example of works because he follows God's explicit command in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. By contrast Rahab is given no explicit command. She carries out God's will without command. She is in fact a better example than Abraham in demonstrating that faith must express itself in works, as she acts in response to no specific directive. Since she believes that God has chosen Israel as His own nation, she decides on her own initiative to do everything in her power to protect the representatives of God's nation. For this reason she provides a haven for the Hebrew spies and helps them escape back to their own lines (Joshua 2). The early Jewish

LIFE APPLICATION

How are belief, faith and works interrelated?