

**James 2:
What Is a Dead Faith?**
Chapter 3 of **The Gospel Under Siege**
by Zane C. Hodges

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Chapter 3 of
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“A discussion of James 2:14-26, a theological storm-center dealing with faith and works”

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**JAMES 2:
WHAT IS A DEAD FAITH?**

Introduction

“Faith without works is dead.” So spoke James in the second chapter of his epistle. His statement has been appealed to many times to support the idea that works are necessary for eternal salvation.

Sometimes the claim is made that unless faith is followed by good works, the believer loses eternal life. At other times, a more subtle approach is taken. If a professing Christian does not manifest good works, he was never a true believer to begin with. Whatever James is saying, however, it can be neither of these ideas.

Dead Faith Is Like A Corpse: It Was Once Alive

The second view, just mentioned, is so forced and artificial that if it were not maintained by obviously sincere men, it might be called dishonest. According to this view, a dead faith cannot save. Therefore, if a man lacks the crucial evidence of good works, it shows that this is all he has *ever* possessed - a dead faith.

This flies directly into the face of the text. In James 2:26 the writer affirms:

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

No one who encountered a dead body, whose life-giving spirit had departed, would ever conclude that the body had never been alive. Quite the contrary. The presence of a corpse is the clearest proof of a *loss* of life. If we allow this illustration to speak for itself, then the presence of a dead faith shows that this faith was once alive.

Nor is there *anything at all* in the entire passage to support some other conclusion. As elsewhere in the epistle, it is Christian brothers who are addressed (2:14; cf. 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5; 3:1, 10, 12; etc.). There is *absolutely nothing to suggest* James believed that if a man's faith is pronounced dead, it must therefore always have been dead. The assumption that a dead faith has always been dead cannot be extracted from James's text. It is nothing more than a theological idea read into the passage.¹ It is also a desperate expedient intended to salvage some form of harmony between James and the doctrine of Paul.

¹ Gerstner (p. 229) seeks to counter this point when he writes: “James 2:26 makes the point of the passage perfectly clear. All that James says is that, just as you cannot have a man without a body and spirit together, so you cannot have a Christian without works and faith together.”

But what impartial reader would ever get *this* idea out of James's text? In no way does James say that one does not “have a man” simply because his spirit has left his body. What we have in fact is a *dead* man - which is exactly James's point. A dead man is produced by the departure of his spirit from his physical body. Just so, a person's faith dies (becomes like a ‘dead man’) when it ceases to be invigorated by good works.

Surely Gerstner would admit that if a physical body is dead, it was clearly once alive. But he wishes not to draw any theological comparison with faith at this point because that would contradict his theological premises. My point still stands: The idea that a dead faith can never have been alive cannot be extracted from the text of 2:26 or of 2:14-26 as a whole. It is pure and simple theology, unsupported by evidence. In view of 2:26, the text *might indeed* be read just as I read it.

But by distorting the true meaning of the text, this idea has given rise to immense confusion. This confusion has had a harmful impact on men's comprehension of the Gospel of God's saving grace.

James Believed in the Free Gift of Life

We should carefully observe that James, like all the inspired writers, believed eternal life was the gracious gift of God. This is made plain in a splendid passage in his first chapter: Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures (James 1:17, 18).

Anyone who is familiar with the words of Jesus, as James certainly was, can surely hear an echo of our Lord in a statement like this. New birth is a sovereign act of God. It is one of His good and perfect gifts which comes down *from above*.

In fact, in the expression "from above," James employs exactly the same word that Jesus used when He told Nicodemus, "You must be born *again*" (John 3:7). The Greek adverb is *anōthen* and means both "again" and "from above." No doubt our Lord deliberately selected it for His discourse with Nicodemus. The supernatural birth which He was describing is both a *rebirth* and a *birth from above*. The play on words which this involves is an effective one.

In James's statement about our rebirth there is also a strong emphasis on the sovereign will of God. "Of His own will He brought us forth. . ." James insists. This perspective recalls Paul's statement found in 2 Corinthians 4:6:

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Here, too, the sovereign act of God is stressed.

Neither Paul nor James intends to deny the necessity of faith. But faith, as we see it in the simple, direct statements of the Bible about salvation, is nothing more than a response to a divine initiative. It is the means by which eternal life is received.

Since this is so, it is proper that God Himself should be viewed as the sovereign Actor at the moment of conversion. It is He who wills to regenerate. It is His Word that penetrates our darkness. Salvation, we may say, occurs when the sufficiency of Christ for my eternal need dawns on my darkened heart. At this moment of believing illumination, I become a Christian.

So there is no reason to doubt that James and Paul were in harmony about the way eternal life is received. For both of them it is the gift of God, graciously and sovereignly bestowed. Only when we take this unity for granted can we really begin to understand the meaning of James's instruction about works.

Exposition of James 2:14-26

(1) Works and Grace Cannot Be Mixed

The place to start is where James starts. In James 2:14 his famous discussion is opened with the words:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Faith cannot save him, can it? (Greek.)

The translation just given is based on the original Greek and is crucial to a correct interpretation. The form of the question which James asks in the last part of the verse is one which expects a negative response. The expected answer, from James's point of view, would be: "No, faith cannot save him."

Anyone who holds that faith and works are *both* conditions for reaching heaven will find no problem with a question like this. In that case the question simply means that faith by itself is not enough. In fact, this is precisely what James says in verse 17: "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

But the problem comes when we try to harmonize this idea with the Apostle Paul's clear denial that works are a *condition* for salvation.

For Paul, the inclusion of works would be a denial of grace. He is emphatic on this point: And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work (Rom. 11:6).

It is hard to quarrel with this point of view! In fact it is impossible to do so. Paul's point is that once works are made a condition for attaining some goal, that goal can no longer be said to be attained by grace.

But in James 2, James plainly makes works a condition for salvation. The failure to admit this is the chief source of the problems supposedly arising from this passage for most evangelicals. We ought to start by admitting it. *And we ought then to admit that James cannot be talking about salvation BY GRACE!*

But instead of admitting these points, many interpreters dodge them. This is frequently done by trying to translate the question, "Can faith save him?" (2:14), by "Can that [or, such] faith save him?" But the introduction of words like "that" or "such" as qualifiers for "faith" is really an evasion of the text. The Greek does not at all verify this sort of translation.²

Support for the renderings "such faith" or "that faith" is usually said to be found in the presence of the Greek definite article with the word "faith." But in this very passage, the definite article also occurs with "faith" in verses 17, 18, 20, 22 and 26. (In verse 22, the

² A. T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James* (Nashville: Broadman, n.d.), p. 94 n. 2, assigns to the article "almost the original demonstrative force." But this is *extremely* unlikely here when it is not even true later in the passage where the article appears with faith at 2:17, 20, 22(twice), and 26. Any student of the original language can examine James's text and see for himself that the article occurs with faith only when faith is a subject or has a possessive word qualifying it (as in verse 18). Otherwise there is no article. There is no subtle significance to the article in 2:14! Quite rightly Dibelius rejects the special stress on the article: "Here Jas uses the article before 'faith'. . . , but this is not to be read 'this faith', as many interpreters from Bede to Mayor have argued. Jas is not speaking of any particular brand of faith. . . The only attributive which is expressed. . . is this: faith which 'has' no works. But this is still the Christian faith and not an 'alleged, false faith.'" So much for building theology on an undetectable grammatical nuance! See Martin Dibelius, *James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, ed. Helmut Koester, Herm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, Eng. ed. 1976), p. 152.

reference is to Abraham's faith!) In none of these places are the words "such" or "that" proposed as natural translations.

As is well known, the Greek language often employed the definite article with abstract nouns (like faith, love, hope, etc.) where English cannot do so. In such cases we leave the Greek article untranslated.

The attempt to single out 2:14 for specialized treatment carries its own refutation on its face. It must be classed as a truly desperate effort to support an insupportable interpretation.

James's point is really quite plain: faith alone cannot save!³

(2) Salvation for the Believer's Life

But what are we left with? A contradiction between James and Paul? This is what many have candidly thought, and it is easy to see why.⁴ If James and Paul are talking about the same thing, they *do* contradict each other.

But are they talking about the same thing?

In the opening chapter of the epistle, shortly after declaring his readers to be the offspring of God's regenerating activity (1:18), James writes:

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves (Jam. 1:21, 22).

That this passage is analogous to 2:14 is easy to see. Here, too, James is affirming the necessity of *doing* something, and he clearly means that only if his readers *do* God's Word will it be able to "save their souls."

At first glance, this seems only to repeat the problem already encountered. But in fact it offers us the solution. The reason we do not see it immediately is due to the fact that we are English speakers with a long history of theological indoctrination. To us, the expression "save your souls" can scarcely mean anything else than "to be delivered from hell."

But this is the meaning *least likely* to occur to a Greek reader of the same text. In fact the expression "to save the soul" represents a Greek phrase whose most common meaning in English would be "to save the life." In the New Testament it occurs in this sense in parallel passages Mark 3:4 and Luke 6:9 (see also Luke 9:56). Among the numerous places where it is used with this meaning in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the following references would be especially clear to the English reader: Genesis 19:17 and 32:30; 1 Samuel 19:11; and Jeremiah 48:6. Perhaps even more to the point, the phrase occurs again in James 5:20, and here the words "from death" are added.

By contrast, the expression is never found in any New Testament text which describes the conversion experience!

The natural sense of the Greek phrase ("to save your lives") fits perfectly into the larger context of James 1. Earlier, James was discussing the consequences of sin. He has said,

³ Lorenzen writes: "The original Greek makes it clear . . . that the rhetorical question calls for a negative answer: No! Faith without works cannot save! Works are necessary for salvation." Thorwald Lorenzen, "Faith without Works does not count before God! James 2:14-16," *Expository Times* 89 (1978):231.

⁴ Lorenzen, p. 234, holds that Paul and James cannot be reconciled. He is not alone in this view.

“Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (1:15). Sin, states James, has its final outcome in physical death. But obedience to God can defer death and “save” or “preserve” the life. This truth is echoed also by Paul (see Rom. 8:13).

This understanding of James 1:21 agrees completely with 5:19, 20, where James says to his fellow Christians:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

On this attractive note of mutual spiritual concern among the brethren, James closes his letter. But in doing so, he manages to emphasize once again that sin can lead to death.⁵

It has been observed that the Epistle of James is the New Testament writing which most clearly reflects the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The theme of death as the consequence of sin is an extremely frequent one in the book of Proverbs. A few illustrative texts can be mentioned:

The fear of the Lord prolongs days,
But the years of the wicked will be shortened (Prov. 10:27).

As righteousness leads to life,
So he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death (Prov. 11:19).

In the way of righteousness is life,
And in its pathway there is no death (Prov. 12:28).

The law of the wise is a fountain of life,
To turn one away from the snares of death (Prov. 13:14).

He who keeps the commandment keeps his own soul [i.e., his life!],
But he who is careless of his ways will die (Prov. 19:16).

It is clear that this is the Old Testament concept which furnishes the background for James’s thought. A recognition of this fact clarifies a great deal. “To save the soul” (=“life”) is to preserve the physical life from an untimely death due to sin.

(3) The Development of James’s Thought in 1:21-2:26

It is best to regard James 1:21-2:26 as a single large section in the development of the epistle. James 1:21 sets the theme. The readers, who are born-again Christians (1:18), need to lay wickedness aside and receive the Word of God as the agent capable of saving their lives. But they must understand (1:22-25) that this will only occur if they are *doers* of the Word and not mere hearers. To be a mere hearer is to commit the folly of looking into the divine mirror of truth and forgetting what it tells us about ourselves. Only the man who is a “*doer of work*” (1:25, Greek) can expect God’s blessing on his life.

There follows in 1:26-2:13 some specific information about what a “doer of work” actually does. He controls his tongue, is charitable to the needy, and keeps himself pure from worldly defilement (1:26-27). Moreover, he rejects the spirit of partiality and

⁵ This point is also made by Ropes, who writes of 5:20: “Note how here, as in 1:15, death is the result of sin.” See James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916), p. 315.

favoritism which is so common in the world (2:1-13). That spirit is wholly inconsistent with his faith in the Lord of glory (2:1).

Instead of partiality, therefore, there should be true obedience to “the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (2:8). In fact, love and its handmaiden, mercy, are standards by which the lives of believers will be assessed at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2:13). They should therefore “so speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty” (2:12). The reference back to 1:25 is obvious in the phrase “law of liberty.”

In referring to judgment, of course, James does not contradict the declaration of John 5:24 that the believer does not come into judgment. There is *no* judgment for the regenerate person if by that term is meant a weighing of his merits in terms of heaven or hell. There is not even any charge that can be brought against the redeemed believer. He is *justified* before the bar of eternal justice, as Paul so plainly states (Rom. 8:33, 34). Thus there cannot be any trial at all to determine the believer’s eternal destiny. God declares that a settled matter when He justifies.

But the New Testament *does* teach an assessment of the believer’s earthly experience in connection with rewards, or the loss of these. (See 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10.) More will be said of this in a later chapter.

James 2:14-26 is the final subsection of the larger unit, 1:21-2:26. At 2:14 James returns to the thought expressed in 1:21 about “saving the life.” Since he has insisted that “saving the life” is only possible when one is actually a “*doer of work*”[!], he wishes now (2:14) to oppose the idea that faith can substitute for obedience and accomplish the same saving result he had mentioned earlier (1:21).

(4) “Dead” Faith Cannot Keep A Christian Alive (2:14-17)

Keeping in mind the concept of “saving the life by obedience,” we can now look more closely at James 2:14-17. James writes:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled”, but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (Jam. 2:14-17).

Can the fact that a man holds correct beliefs and is orthodox “save” him from the deadly consequences of sin? Of course not! The very thought is absurd. That is like giving your best wishes to a destitute brother or sister when what they really need is food and clothing (2:15-16). It is utterly fruitless!

As a matter of fact, this kind of callous conduct on the part of one Christian toward another is precisely what James has been warning against (see 1:27; 2:2-6)! It superbly illustrates his point. Such idle words are as “dead” (ineffectual) as a non-working faith! So James says, “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (2:17).

It needs to be carefully considered why James chose the term “dead” to describe a faith that is not working. But the moment we relate this term to the controlling theme of “saving the life,” everything becomes plain. The issue that concerns James is an issue of *life* or *death*. (He is *not* discussing salvation from hell!) The truth which he has in mind is

that of Proverbs: “As righteousness leads to life, so he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death” (Prov. 11:19).

Can a *dead* faith save the Christian from *death*? The question answers itself. The choice of the adjective “dead” is perfectly suited to James’s argument. Just as the idle words of some ungenerous believer cannot save his brother from death in the absence of life’s necessities, no more can a non-working faith save *our* lives from the deadly consequences of sin.

(5) An Objector Speaks (2:18,19)

In 2:18–19 James introduces the words of an imagined objector.⁶ The entirety of these verses belong to the objector. The response of James only begins in verse 20. This is shown by the words, “But do you want to know, O foolish man . . . ”⁷

The literary format James uses here was familiar in ancient times from the Greek diatribe. The diatribe was a learned and argumentative form of communication. The two phrases (“But someone will say” [verse 18], and “But do you want to know, O foolish man” [verse 20]) clearly show that the diatribe format is being employed. These two phrases bracket the words of the objector in verses 18, 19. Elsewhere in the New Testament, this same format appears in 1 Corinthians 15:35, 36.⁸

Since the statements in verse 19 about the belief of men and demons are the words of the objector - not of James! - their use by commentators to make a theological point is totally misguided. But what does the objection mean? Since most Greek manuscripts read the

⁶ The importance of a correct view of these verses is hard to overstate. Sanguine indeed is the opinion of Cantinat that, though verses 18-19 are very difficult - perhaps the most difficult in the New Testament - these difficulties do not greatly affect our comprehension of the text! The exact opposite is the case: these difficulties, if left unresolved, significantly block our understanding. Jean Cantinat, *Les Epîtres de Saint Jacques et de Saint Jude* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1973), p. 10.

⁷ The evident unity of verses 18-19 as constituting the words of a single speaker is strongly attested in the literature on this passage. Many of those who have accepted this unity, however, have regarded the speaker not as an objector but as a pious ally who takes James’s point of view. But this explanation is rightly dismissed by Davids because “no one has yet been able to find a case where this common stylistic introduction did not introduce an opposing or disagreeing voice.” Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 124. Among those treating the two verses as a unity are: Robert Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, c1888), pp. 188-190; R. W. Dale, *The Epistle of James and Other Discourses* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), pp. 70, 71; so apparently R. J. Knowling, *The Epistle of St. James*, WC (London: Methuen, 1904), pp. 56-59; Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1910; reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1977), p. 101; and Christiaan E. Donker, “Der Verfasser des Jak und sein Gegner: Zum Problem des Einwandes in Jak 2 18-19,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 72 (1981):227-240; and Francois Vouga, *L’Épître de Saint Jacques* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1984), p. 87.

⁸ Note this same format also in Romans 9:19, 20: (Objector) “You will say to me then, ‘Why does . . . ?’” (Response): “But indeed. O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed . . . ?” The use of such structural markers as “but someone will say” and sharp-toned epithets directed at a senseless or ungodly interlocutor are well-known features of the diatribe style so prevalent in James’s and Paul’s day. For references see Mayor, pp. 99 and 102; Ropes, pp. 208 and 216; Davids, pp. 123 and 126 (bibliographic data in nn.5 and 7).

word “by” in place of the familiar word “without” in verse 18,⁹ the objector’s statement may be given as follows:

But someone will say:

“You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith from your works, and I will show you, from my works, my faith. You believe that there is one God; you do well. The demons also believe, and tremble” (Jam. 2:18, 19, Greek).

The argument which these words express appears to be a *reductio ad absurdum* (a reduction to absurdity). It is heavy with irony.¹⁰

“It is absurd,” says the objector, “to see a close connection between faith and works. For the sake of argument, let’s say *you* have faith and *I* have works. Let’s start there. *You* can no more start with what you believe and show it to me in your works, than *I* can start with my works and demonstrate what it is that I believe.” The objector is confident that both tasks are impossible.

The impossibility of showing one’s faith from one’s works is now demonstrated (so the objector thinks) by this illustration: “Men and demons both believe the same truth (that there is one God), but their faith does not produce the same response. Although this article of faith may move a *man* to ‘do well,’ it never moves the *demons* to ‘do well.’¹¹ All *they* can do is tremble. Faith and works, therefore, have no built-in connection at all. The same creed may produce entirely different kinds of conduct. Faith cannot be made visible in works!”

No doubt James and his readers had heard this argument before. It was precisely the kind of defensive approach a man might take when his orthodoxy was not supported by good deeds. “Faith and works are not really related to each other in the way you say they are, James. So don’t criticize the vitality of my faith because I don’t do such and such a thing.”

James’s reply (2:20) may be paraphrased: “What a senseless argument! How foolish you are to make it! I still say that without works your faith is dead. Would you like to know why?”

Verses 21-23 are James’s direct rebuttal of the objection. This is made clear in the Greek text by the singular form of “do you see” in verse 22. This shows he is addressing the objector. Only with the “you see” of verse 24 does James return to the plural and to his readers as a whole.

⁹ See also the author’s “Light on James Two from Textual Criticism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120(1963):341-350. As can be seen from nn. 7 and 8 above, the decision to treat verses 18, 19 as the words of a single speaker is not based on whether “by” or “without” is to be read in verse 18.

¹⁰ The use of the challenge to “show me” in an ironical sense is well documented by Dibelius, pp. 154-155 n. 29. Especially parallel to James is a passage from *Ad Autolytus* 1.2, in which the apologist Theophilus writes: “But even if you should say, ‘Show me your God’, I too might say to you, ‘Show me your Man and I also will show you my God.’” But this same ironic and unfulfillable demand is frequent in Epictetus, for example in the scorn of *Discourses* 3.22.99: “Who in the world are you? The bull of the herd or the queen of the beehive? Show me the symbols of your rulership!” For additional examples see Dibelius.

¹¹ The Greek phrase (*kalos poieis*) is taken by us in the sense of “do good,” “do right,” which seems the most appropriate sense in Matthew 5:44; 12:12; Luke 6:27. It is also viable in Acts 10:33 (“you did the right thing to come”) and even in James 2:8 (“If you keep the royal law . . . you are doing what’s right”). Attention should be given also to the secular examples cited by Mayor, p. 101. In Hellenistic Greek one would be unwise to insist pedantically on the good/well differentiation so dear to strict English grammarians!

(6) Justification By Works (2:20-24)

In refuting the objection he has cited, James selects the most prestigious name in Jewish history, the patriarch Abraham. He selects also his most honored act of obedience to God, the offering of his own son Isaac. Since in Christian circles it was well known that Abraham was justified by faith, James now adds a highly original touch. He was also justified by works!

James writes:

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God (Jam. 2:20-23).

Earlier in this discussion we said that we can best understand James's point of view by recognizing his harmony with Paul. That is extremely relevant here. James does not wish to deny that Abraham, or anyone else, could be justified by faith alone. He merely wishes to insist that there is also *another* justification, and it is *by works*.

Of course there is no such thing as a single justification by faith *plus* works. Nothing James says suggests that idea. Rather, there are *two kinds* of justification.

This point is confirmed by a careful reading of the Greek text of verse 24. When he returns to his readers generally, James says, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not only [justified] by faith." The key to this understanding is the Greek adverb "only," which does not simply qualify the word "faith" but the whole idea of the second clause. James is saying: Justification by faith is not the *only* kind of justification there is. There is also the kind which is by works.¹²

Somewhat surprisingly, to most people, the Apostle Paul agrees with this. Writing at what was no doubt a later time than James, Paul states in Romans 4:2, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God." The form of this statement does not deny the truth of the point under consideration. The phrase, "but not before God," strongly suggests that the Apostle can conceive of a sense in which men *are* justified by works. But, he insists, that is not the way men are justified *before God*. That is, it does not establish their legal standing before Him.¹³

¹² The word "alone," or "only," in Greek is adverbial in form and ought not to be taken as a modifier of "faith" in the sense of "by faith alone." This point is often ignored by writers. However, Lange grants that the Greek word for "alone" might be connected with the word "justified" in the sense, "not only by faith but by works a man is justified," but he argues that in fact it ought to be joined "adjectively" with the word "faith." But in the New Testament, when the word *monos* ("alone") modifies a noun it normally has formal concord with the noun. The adverbial use is the only natural one here, i.e., "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not only (justified) by faith." See J. P. Lange, *The Epistle General of James in his A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical, with Special Reference to Ministers and Students* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1869). p. 87.

¹³ Some have indeed sought a reconciliation between James and Paul in terms of differing concepts of works. Some time ago Lenski expressed a distinction that has often been asserted in one form or another. He states: "Paul and James deal with different kinds of works. Paul deals with law-works, which have nothing to do with true Gospel-faith . . . James deals with Gospel-works, which ever evidence the presence of Gospel-faith . . ." R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938), p. 587. But this distinction is without foundation

In responding, therefore, to the kind of person who tried to divorce faith and works in Christian experience, James takes a skillful approach. “Wait a moment, you foolish man,” he is saying, “you make much of justification by faith, but can’t you see how Abraham was also justified by works when he offered his son Isaac to God?” (2:21). “Is it not obvious how his faith was cooperating with his works and, in fact, by works his faith was made mature?” (2:22). “In this way, too, the full significance of the Scripture about his justification by faith was brought to light, for now he could be called the friend of God” (2:23).

The content of this passage is rich indeed. It is a pity that it has been so widely misunderstood. The faith which justifies - James never denies that it *does* justify! - can have an active and vital role in the life of the obedient believer. As with Abraham, it can be the dynamic for great acts of obedience. In the process, faith itself can be “perfected.” The Greek word suggests development and maturation. Faith is thus nourished and strengthened by works.¹⁴

It would hardly be possible to find a better illustration of James’s point anywhere in the Bible. The faith by which Abraham was justified was basically faith in a God of resurrection. Referring to the occasion when that faith was first exercised, Paul wrote: And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform (Rom. 4:19-21).

Abraham had confidence that the God he believed in could overcome the “deadness” of his own body and of Sarah’s womb. But it was only through the testing with Isaac that this faith becomes a specific conviction that God could literally raise a person from the dead to fulfill His oath. Accordingly, the author of Hebrews declares:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense (Heb. 11:17-19).

Thus the faith of Abraham was strengthened and matured by works! From a conviction that God could overcome a “deadness” in his own body (=inability to beget children), he moved to the assurance that God could actually resurrect his son’s body from literal, physical death. In the process of carrying out the divine command to sacrifice his beloved boy, his faith grew and reached new heights of confidence in God.

In this way, too, the Scripture that spoke of his original justification “was fulfilled.” That statement (Gen. 15:6) was not a prophecy, of course. But its implications were richly developed and exposed by the subsequent record of Abraham’s obedience. Abraham’s works “filled it full” of meaning, so to speak, by showing the extent to which that faith

and has been effectively criticized by Douglas J. Moo in “ ‘Law’, ‘Works of the Law’ and Legalism in Paul,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45(1983) :73-100. As we have already seen (chapter 1 n.2) Calvin encountered this same argument from the “sophists” and rejects it (*Institutes* III.xi.14).

¹⁴ About the statement in verse 22 (“by works faith was made perfect”), Adamson aptly observes: “The force of the statement seems to be that faith is fulfilled, strengthened, and matured by exercise.” James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 130.

could develop and undergird a life of obedience. Simple and uncomplicated though it was at first, Abraham's justifying faith had potential ramifications which only his works, built on it, could disclose.¹⁵

And now he could be called the "friend of God," not only by God Himself, but also by men (cf. Isa. 41:8; 2 Chr. 20:7). This is in fact the name by which Abraham has been known down through the centuries in many lands and by at least three religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam). Had Abraham not obeyed God in the greatest test of his life, he would still have been justified by the faith he exercised in Genesis 15:6. But by allowing that faith to be *alive* in his works, he attained an enviable title among men. In this way he was also justified by works!

When a man is justified by faith he finds an unqualified acceptance before God. As Paul puts it, such a man is one "to whom God imputes righteousness without works" (Rom. 4:6). But only God can see this spiritual transaction. When, however, a man is justified by works he achieves an intimacy with God that is manifest to men. He can then be called "the friend of God," even as Jesus said, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:14).¹⁶

(7) James's Concluding Words (2:24-26)

Leaving the imagined objector behind, James returns in verses 24-26 to address the readership directly. Rahab furnishes him with his final Biblical example of justification by works. James says:

You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also (Jam. 2:24-26).

It should be carefully observed that he does *not* say, "Was not Rahab justified by faith *and* works"! As already mentioned, such an idea is foreign to James. He is talking about exactly what he says he is talking about: justification by works!

Rahab, however, is superbly suited to tie his thoughts together. The passage had begun, as we have seen, with a reference to his theme of "saving the life" (2:14; 1:21). Not surprisingly, Rahab is selected as a striking example of a person whose physical life was "saved" precisely because she had works.

With James's words the statement of the writer of Hebrews can be profitably compared. In 11:31, that author writes of her:

¹⁵ Hort explains "the Scripture was fulfilled" (verse 23) as follows: "The Divine word spoken is conceived of as receiving a completion so to speak in acts or events which are done or come to pass in accordance with it. The idea of filling, or giving fullness to, is always contained in the biblical use of fulfilling, though not always in the same sense." See Fenton John Anthony Hort, *Expository and Exegetical Studies: Compendium of Works Formerly Published Separately: The Epistle of James* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1980), p. 64. See also the stimulating discussion of Adamson, pp. 130-132.

¹⁶ One must note Darby's comment on this passage: "James, remark, never says that works justify us before God [*italics his*]; for God can see the faith without its works. He knows that life is there. It is in exercise with regard to Him, towards Him, by trust in His word, in Himself, by receiving His testimony in spite of everything within and without. This God sees and knows. But when our fellow creatures are in question, when it must be said 'shew,' then faith, life, shows itself in works." J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Colossians - Revelation*, new ed. rev. (reprint ed., New York: Loizeaux, 1942), p. 361. This also is essentially the view of Calvin (see n.21 in this chapter).

By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.

Notice that the author of Hebrews points to her faith and lays the stress on the fact that she “received” the spies. James, on the other hand, points also to the fact that “she sent them out another way.” This has considerable significance for James’s argument.

Although Rahab’s faith began to operate the moment she “received the messengers,” she could not really be justified by works until she had “sent them out another way.” The reason for this is obvious when the story in Joshua 2 is carefully considered. Up until the last moment, she could still have betrayed the spies. Had she so desired, she could have sent their pursuers after them.

That the spies had lingering doubts about her loyalty is suggested by their words in Joshua 2:20, “And if you tell this business of ours, then we will be free from your oath ...” But the spies’ successful escape demonstrated that Rahab was truly a “friend of God” because she was also *their* friend. In this way, Rahab was justified by works.¹⁷

And in the process, she saved her own life and her family’s! Her faith, therefore, was very much *alive* because it was an active, working faith. Though she was a harlot - and both inspired writers remind us that she was - her living faith triumphed over the natural consequences of her sin. While all the inhabitants of Jericho perished under the divine judgment which Israel executed, she *lived* because her faith *lived*!

James therefore wishes his readers to know that works are in fact the vitalizing “spirit” which keeps one’s faith alive in the same way that the human spirit keeps the human body alive (2:26). Whenever a Christian ceases to act on his faith, that faith atrophies and becomes little more than a creedal corpse. “Dead orthodoxy” is a danger that has always confronted Christian people and they do well to take heed to this danger.¹⁸ But the antidote is a simple one: faith remains vital and alive as long as it is being translated into real works of living obedience.

Summary

Does James contradict Paul’s doctrine of free grace, or John’s insistence on faith as the single condition of eternal life? Far from it. But neither does he offer support to the widespread notion that a “dead faith” cannot exist in the life of a Christian. Ironically,

¹⁷ An indirect testimony to the depth of Rahab’s vindication before men is to be found in the significant role Rahab played in Jewish legend. For specifics, see Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* HNTC (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 137. Thanks to James, her name lives on in Christianity as a challenging role-model for every born-again believer who, though already justified by faith, also aspires to be justified by works.

¹⁸ The view that James is talking about a false, spurious faith has nothing to commend it. Even though he holds that final salvation is in view in James 2, Nicol is absolutely correct when he writes: “James’s point is not that faith without works is not faith; as faith he does not criticize it, but merely stresses that faith does not fulfill its purpose when it is not accompanied by works.” See W. Nicol, “Faith and Works in the Letter of James,” in *Essays on the General Epistles of the New Testament*, Neotestamentica 9 (Pretoria: The New Testament Society of South Africa, c1975), p. 16. See his whole discussion here, especially the statement (pp. 16, 17): “Our conclusion is that in this pericope James is not discussing different kinds of faith - as the Reformed scholars we have cited assert; he emphasize that those who believe must do good works.”

See also Plummer, who writes: “But St. James nowhere throws doubt on the truth of the unprofitable believer’s professions, or on the possibility of believing much and doing nothing.” Alfred Plummer, *The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1905), p. 137.

that is exactly what he is warning against. Thus, a misunderstanding of his words has not only promoted confusion about the terms for eternal life, but it has also deprived the Church of a much-needed warning.¹⁹

The dangers of a dead faith are real. But these dangers do not include hell.²⁰ Nothing James writes suggests this. Nevertheless, sin remains a deadly enemy to Christian experience which can prematurely end our physical lives. The wisdom of the Old Testament and James are agreed about this. So, if Christians are to be “saved” from that result, they will need more than faith.

They will also need works.²¹

¹⁹ Strikingly on target are the remarks of Dibelius (p. 178) who writes: “But in all of the instances [in James] which have been examined thus far what is involved is the faith which the Christian has, never the faith of the sinner which first brings him to God . . . The faith which is mentioned in this section can be presupposed in every Christian . . . [James’s] intention is not dogmatically oriented, but practically oriented: *he wishes to admonish the Christians to practice their faith, i.e., their Christianity, by works*” (italics his). As far as it goes a better statement cannot be found in the literature on James

²⁰ James 2:14-26 is also treated as unrelated to the question of eternal destiny by R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), pp. 170-172, 207-217. Although Kendall relates 2:14 to the saving of the destitute poor person described in verses 15, 16, his perspective on the passage is not very dissimilar to the view I have taken.

²¹ A word should be said about John Calvin’s own treatment of James 2:14-26. To the surprise of some, perhaps, we do not find in Calvin anything that reflects the theological tangle into which Reformed theology has fallen. In two critical points, Calvin agrees with the present writer *against* Reformed theology. The two points are these: (1) justification by works does not refer to our justification before God, but rather before men; (2) our good works are not the basis of our assurance of salvation.

Calvin says these things plainly: “So when the sophists set James against Paul, they are deceived by the double meaning of the term ‘justification’. When Paul says we are justified by faith, he means precisely that we have won a verdict of righteousness in the sight of God. James has quite another intention, that the man who professes himself to be faithful *should demonstrate the truth of his fidelity by works*. James did not mean to teach us *where the confidence of our salvation should rest* - which is the very point on which Paul does insist. So let us avoid the false reasoning which has trapped the sophists, by taking note of the double meaning: To Paul, the word denotes our free imputation of righteousness before the judgment seat of God, to James, *the demonstration of righteousness from its effects, before men*; which we may deduce from the preceding words, *Shew me thy faith, etc.* [italics in the text]. In the latter sense, we may admit without controversy that man is justified by works, just as you might say a man is enriched by the purchase of a large and costly estate, since his wealth, which beforehand he kept out of sight in a strongbox, has become well-known” (italics added except in the case specified). Calvin, *Comm.* James 2.21.

Neither does Calvin fall into the hopeless quagmire of talking about a “spurious” faith which simulates the real thing so that true faith can only be recognized by works (see quotation from Dabney in chapter 2 n. 1.) Calvin will not give the name of faith to those whom he considers James to be attacking. He writes, for example: “He [James] is speaking of false profession, and his words make this certain. He does not start, ‘If a man has faith’, but ‘If a man says he has faith . . .’ Plainly he implies that there are hypocrites who make an *empty boast* of the word, when they have no real claim on it.” A few sentences later, he says. “Just remember, he is not speaking out of his own understanding of the word when he calls it ‘faith’, but is disputing with those who *pretend insincerely* to faith, but are entirely without it” (on 2:14; italics added).

Although I might quarrel with Calvin’s exegesis here, at least he is consistent with the fundamental premises of his own theology. Since, for Calvin, assurance was of the essence of saving faith, he does not ascribe this “false profession” to any who have found that assurance, but describes those without works as *insincere* pretenders who make a *false* claim to faith. Thus he will also ascribe to such people only “an indifferent and formal understanding of God” (on 2:14) or “a certain uninformed opinion of God” (on 2:19) or “a bare and empty awareness of God” (on 2:23). This is a far cry from his own definition of faith as “a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence toward us” which is “founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ” (*Institutes* III.ii.7; quoted in full in chapter 2 n.5). Calvin does *not* hold that

ENDNOTES

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	The Anchor Bible
BGD	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 2nd edition Revised and Augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's Fifth Edition, 1958 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BSC	Bible Study Commentary
CGNT	Cambridge Greek New Testament
<i>Comm.</i>	Stands exclusively for the commentaries of John Calvin which are always quoted from the series <i>Calvin's Commentaries</i> , ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, various dates).
Herm	Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible.
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin's <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , always quoted from the 2 vol. translation by John Allen (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1935).
MNTC	Moffatt New Testament Commentary
NIC	New International Commentary
NIGNTC	New International Greek New Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentaries
WC	Westminster Commentaries

faith must be subjectively verified *to ourselves* by works, but objectively verified *before men*.
To be sure, Calvin expected good works to be produced in the life of the justified, but so do I.