

Abraham and Rehab

by Alistair Begg

Faith without deeds is dead, and true faith is demonstrated through actions that align with it.

Duration: 34:45

Scripture: Genesis 15:6, Matthew 6:33, James 2:21-23

Topics: "Abraham"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of God's promise to Abraham and how Abraham responded in faith. God appeared to Abraham and promised him that he would have countless descendants. Despite being childless, Abraham believed God's promise. The preacher emphasizes the importance of genuine faith that is accompanied by actions and good deeds. He also highlights the practical nature of the book of James, which exposes false faith and emphasizes the need for evidence of faith through deeds.

Transcript

James chapter 2 and verse 20. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend.

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the Spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. Father, we come humbly to you, asking for your help as we open our hearts and lives to the truth of your Word.

May the Spirit of God be our teacher and our convincer, and may our lives be changed. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.

How can we be sure that our profession of faith is real? That the faith that we talk about is true faith? That when we say we have peace with God, that we really do have peace with God? These are the kind of unsettling questions that are confronting us as we work our way through this second half of James chapter 2. And they're questions, as we have said, that we dare not leave unanswered. Nor should we try and

sidle out of them by some kind of vague conception of faith--a kind of thing that we hear routinely as a week unfolds, people saying, Well, I'm sure if you have faith, or if you believe hard enough, that all will be well in the end--a kind of quasi-positive thinking approach to whatever comes our way. It's certainly good to think positively about things, but that's not what James is addressing here.

He's addressing the question of the kind of faith that puts men and women into a saving and living relationship with God. And James is far too practical, he's far too caring as a shepherd to leave his readers in any realm of vagueness. What he has done is expose, first of all, false faith, which we have seen in our previous studies.

In verse 14, he begins with a question, What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith and has no deeds? What good is a claim to faith that is unsupported by any practical, observable evidence? And the answer is, it's no good at all. Can that kind of faith save such an individual? No, says James. It can't.

It won't. Despite the fact that the individual may have positive thoughts, may indeed be interested enough to take note of the people around them, to say to somebody who's cold, Well, I do hope you feel warm. Or to say to someone who's hungry, I hope you find a sandwich somewhere.

What good is that? Mere words will not alter the circumstances of the destitute. And then James drives home his illustration, and he says in verse 17, In the same way faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. So he exposes that kind of thing, and then he exposes the futility of a lifeless orthodoxy.

You believe, verse 19, that there is one God? Good! Even the demons believe that, and they shudder. James is writing to an audience that is probably largely Jewish, although a mixture of Jew and Gentile, and it may well be that given the way in which he addresses this issue, that he has the Shema in his mind from Deuteronomy 6, which Orthodox Jews even to this day recite twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. And they begin their recitation with these words, and I quote from the Contemporary Jewish Prayer book, Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD the one and only--which is an Orthodox statement regarding God.

And it may well be that James says, I know that you like to get up in the morning and declare that there is one God. I want you to know that that's pretty good to do that. It's not a bad idea to do that.

But even the demons are up right there with you, and they shudder in recognition of the fact. It may even be that he's saying, What good is it just to say it and do nothing? Even the demons shudder. At least they do something.

They shake. You don't even do anything. All you do is simply say it.

Do you think that in the saying of it, it is an indication of genuine faith? Well, says James, you really ought to be the ones who shudder. Now, it is imperative that we keep in mind what James is doing here. Otherwise, we'll get ourselves tied up in all kinds of knots.

James is directing his argument here--his polemic, if you like--against those whose faith is revealed a hollow sham. He's addressing himself to people who think that simply by the saying of certain things, absent any accompanying indications, any fruit, any acts of service, any deeds, any works, they can have any sense of assurance that their claim to faith is genuine. And as we've said, the contrast is not a contrast between faith and works, but it is a contrast between a faith that is accompanied by works and a faith that is unaccompanied--if you like, a lonely faith.

Such faith, James tells us, is dead. Verse 17. If it is not accompanied by action, it's absolutely useless.

It is dead. He reinforces his thesis all the way through. He finishes with it in verse 26, As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

That's what he's addressing. And having set aside the spurious claims, he then turns to the positive and presents his readers with two examples of faith that is revealed in action. And so, he says in verse 20, Would you like evidence or proof that faith without deeds is useless? Well then, let me call my witnesses.

And he calls into the dock, first of all, Abraham--a wonderful choice, not a surprising choice, the most respected ancestor of the Jewish people and the spiritual father of all who believe. It's interesting, isn't it, that he says, Was not our ancestor Abraham, to a Jew and Gentile audience? Surely he's just the ancestor of the Jew, isn't he? No. In fact, the King James Version refers to him as Our Father Abraham.

And what he is making clear is that all who are included in Christ are actually children of Abraham, in the sense that the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis finds its fulfillment not only in believing Jews but also in believing Gentiles who are gathered under the umbrella of God's amazing grace. Wasn't our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did? And of course, the bell should go off in those who read their Bibles. And the bell goes off and rings and says, But I thought a person wasn't justified by what they did.

In fact, I was reading Paul in the early chapters of Romans, and he appears to be saying the opposite of that. He's suggesting that Abraham himself, whom he uses as an illustration, was not somebody who was working at his salvation. What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about, but not before God. Now, when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift but as an obligation. That's Paul in Romans 4. This is James in James chapter 2. Is this a contradiction? Answer, no.

No. Now, you can take my word for it, and then you can go to your Bibles and check and see if there is a reason to accept my word. Paul is stressing the faith that issues in works, and James is stressing the works that issue from faith.

Paul, the faith that issues in works, and James, the works that issue from faith. Paul is arguing that faith is the only means of being declared righteous--and that is a legal statement, being relieved from the realm of condemnation as a result of being justified, which means to be declared righteous before God--and Paul is arguing absolutely and unequivocally that the only means of a man or a woman being declared righteous is through faith and faith alone, and James is arguing that works are the only way in which a man or a woman who has been declared righteous will be demonstrated to be so. So, if you like, Paul's issue has to do with declaration, and James has to do with demonstration.

And the demonstration of works in the life is the indicator, says James, that such an individual has been declared right before God. Paul is arguing that works are of absolutely zero value in bringing a person into a relationship with God. James is arguing that where such a relationship has been established, works are an essential evidence.

Now, when we consider Abraham, we will be helped, because James calls him as his witness, and he's a very good witness. And I wish, actually, that verse 23 preceded verses 21 and 22, but it doesn't, but we're

going to consider 23 first. The Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend.

Now, I think it'd be helpful for us to just go back to where this was all taking place--the first book of the Bible, Genesis, and to chapter 15. And it's there in Genesis chapter 15 that the incident to which both Paul, in Romans 4 as well as in other places in his letters, and James here in James 2, takes place. It is the record of God's entering into a covenant with Abraham.

He's come to him--in Genesis 12 it's recorded--and told him that through him, all the peoples on earth will be blessed. Quite an amazing statement. How God did this and the way in which it unfolded, we don't know, but God comes and appears to Abram and gives him this promise.

In 15 he comes, and he says, Don't be afraid, Abram, which is an interesting greeting. I am your shield and your very great reward. Abraham replies, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me, since I remain childless? And he says, Things are not going particularly well on this front.

Verse 4, Then the word of the LORD came to him, This man will not be your heir, that is, the man from his servant, but a son is coming from your own body, who will be your heir. And verse 5, He took Abram outside and said, Look up at the heavens and count the stars. If indeed you can count them, then he said to him, So shall your offspring be.

Now, if you just try and get inside of that for just a moment--those of us who are familiar with it can so easily gloss over it--but this is an amazing drama, is it not? God comes again to Abram, whom he's called out of his paganism and his lostness in Ur of the Chaldees, and said to him, Abraham, you're my man. This is what's going to happen to you, Abraham. And this is what will happen through you, Abraham.

Now he comes to him, and he takes him outside, he says, Look up and see if you can count all these stars. You can't? I know you can't. And you will be unable to count the innumerable company of those who become your children, Abraham.

Now, I wish that we could have Abraham right here, and we could put him up in the pulpit and give him a handheld microphone. And we would want to ask him the question, When God spoke to you, Abraham, what did you do? Answer, I believed him. Did you do anything else, Abraham? No, I just believed him.

Doesn't that surprise you, Abraham, that you even believed him? It certainly does. When I think about where I came from, and when I think about the orientation of my life, and when I think about God coming and speaking to me in the first instance and then saying this to me, it is a mystery to me, it is a deep mystery to me--not only that God would come and speak, but that I would both hear his voice and believe what he said. So you just believed.

Yeah? You didn't do anything else? No. Okay. Well, then, is Abraham's faith a lonely faith, a la what James is saying here in chapter 2? Because apparently, all he did was he believed.

That's what it says in Genesis 15, 6. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. He was justified. He was declared safe and secure and righteous before God on the strength of the Messiah who would come.

Incidentally, Jesus, in speaking to the Jews in John chapter 8, I think it is, says to the Jews--it just blows their minds--he says, Abraham saw my day and was glad. And they must have thought, What? Well, no,

his faith was not a lonely faith. And that's the significance of verses 21 and 22.

But don't go back to 21 and 22 yet. Go to Genesis 22, and again, you have the context for what James is saying in chapter 2. And this, of course, is the testing of Abraham. Sometime later, God tested Abraham.

There's no question that he did. And I'll leave that for your homework--part of homework, at least. Remember the context.

God has said to Abraham, It won't be through the child that is born to your servant. It will be from your own body and from you and your wife, that the heir will come who will be the father of an innumerable company. He waits for twenty-five years for that child to be born.

The child is born, and then God comes to him again, and he says, Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about. You could say that this is faith put to the test. After all, if he thinks rationally and reasonably about things, according to the promise that God has made, this boy Isaac is the key to the fulfillment of what he said in Genesis 15.

But it is this very son Isaac that God is now asking him to sacrifice on an altar, which, from a human perspective, says that the very end of the line is reached before we've even begun--that the only heir I have so far is about to go down. How am I going to have any more? But what did he do? He believed God. How do we know? Because of what he did.

So, back in James 2 and in verse 22, you see that his faith--that's Abram's faith, when he offered his son Isaac on the altar--his faith and his actions were working together. Remember, James is addressing the individual who has already said, someone will say, verse 18, you have faith and I have deeds. In other words, someone says, well, can't we just separate this out? James says, no, we can't separate it out.

You can't go at it this way. Faith and deeds go together. That's what he's arguing.

And so he says, his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did, and the Scripture was fulfilled that says Abram believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. What is James saying? He's saying that we can conclude, on the strength of the evidence--verse 24--that a person is justified by what he does inasmuch as this testifies to the existence of real faith. That's what James is saying.

James is not saying that a person is put in a right standing with God as a result of works. He knows his Bible, if you like, too well to say that. He understands what Paul has been saying.

He and Paul are agreed on that. Paul is making sure that at the front end, the person who wants to use works as entry into heaven is confronted by sola fide. James is concerned that the person who wants to hold on to some scrap of testimony of paper that he once became a follower of Jesus and has done nothing about it and never gone on, he wants to confront that individual with the distinct possibility that what he declares to be a sincere faith is nothing other than a false, dead, hopeless, useless faith.

And that is why it is so crucial. From James' perspective, faith alone does not justify. Because, again, from his starting point, the faith that is alone is no faith at all.

Isn't that what James is saying? Sorry, that's why I'm saying you've got to keep your eye on the ball all the way through this. Paul's emphasis--and I say this again for the sake of clarification--Paul's emphasis addresses the individual who thinks that their works contribute to salvation. And he says, No.

Sola fide. Faith alone. James addresses the individual who professes faith in Christ but whose life provides no evidence whatsoever.

Now, let me just show you something in this Genesis passage before we go on. In Genesis 22--and I'm grateful to my friend and guide, Alec Mattia, for this. He points out that here in the Genesis 22 passage we have an illustration of the way in which God accommodates himself to our thinking so as to help us, so as to enable us to get the unfolding picture.

So, for example, in Genesis 15, when God speaks to Abram and he says, So shall your offspring be. And Abram believed the Lord and credited to him as righteousness. Well, God might say, So far, so good.

Now, let me see how Abraham does. Of course, he knows how Abraham does. But the way it unfolds is as if God is looking in to see how he's going, and God's watching him in the intervening period.

And we have the Hagar incident. But now he looks down, and he sees him make this journey. And he sees the donkey, and he sees the wood, and he sees the altar, and he sees the knife, and he sees dear Isaac.

And what does it say in Genesis 22-12? The angel cries out, Do not lay a hand on the boy. Don't do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God.

Now I know! God says, Now I know! He knew all along! What does he mean, Now I know? He says, Now I know, not as some people in open theism teach, because he didn't know and he just found out, but he says it this way as an accommodation to us so that we might understand what's happening. How do we know that the Genesis 15-6 belief is evidence of real faith? Now we know, when the knife is carried up beneath before his son. Now we know.

Why? Because faith and deeds go hand in hand. God knows all along, but he represents himself in this way so as to enable us to get the picture--that true faith produces results, and in particular--and is expressed in Abraham's case here--the result of trusting, costly obedience to the Word of God. Isn't that what we see in Abraham's life? Trusting, costly obedience to God's Word.

How do I know that I am in Christ? Because of my trusting, costly obedience to the Word. No trusting, costly obedience? Question mark. Big question mark, says James.

Call my second witness. We're not going to have as long with you, Rahab, I'm sorry, but at least we'll fit you in before the lunch break. From the most obvious witness, the father of the faith, to the least likely witness, I call Rahab to the stand.

Rahab, just a couple of general questions to begin with. What did you say your occupation was? Ah, thank you. And your background? Are you from the Jewish faith? You're a Canaanite.

A Gentile? Uh-huh. A Canaanite prostitute. Yes.

All right, just so that the jury can be clear. And what about your knowledge of God? Well, she said, I know that the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. All right.

It's quite good. It's not very good, but at least it is a help to us concerning what you have to say. Now, we really want to talk to you, Rahab, about the spies and what you did with the spies.

Can you just tell us what you did with the spies? This is all in Joshua chapter 2, incidentally, and is also part of our assigned homework. What did you do with the spies? Well, I took the spies into my house, I hid them up on the roof, I looked after them for a while, and I made sure that they could sneak out, because the gates of the city were locked, I made sure they could sneak out entirely unharmed. And then maybe just one final question, Rahab.

Why was it that you did this? Well, it just seemed to me that a person who believes in the living God, who is sovereign and compassionate, would act in this way. It just seems to me that someone who believes, albeit, however fledgling a belief, would do what ought to be done. And you see, Rahab's faith stands in direct contrast to the armchair philanthropist up in verse 16.

If one of you says, Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? No good! If Rahab had done that in relationship to the spies, what good would that have been to the spies? No good to the spies at all. They would have been in the clink. Rahab puts her home, her resources, her ingenuity, and her personal safety on the line because hers is a living faith.

By mere contrast, verse 26, a simple profession is a dead thing, comparable only to a corpse from whom the breath of life has vanished. I hope you will do a little bit of research on this, because our time is gone. And you will have a wonderful afternoon, especially if it rains, reading from Joshua chapter 2 and on all the way through to Joshua 6 at least, where you have the story that many of us remember from Sunday school of the walls of Jericho tumbling down.

And when the walls of Jericho come tumbling down, if you look carefully right around 25, you will see that the record details the survival of Rahab and her family on account of the sovereign intervention of God. And when you read chapter 2, it will become apparent to you that in a very similar way to what we described in relationship to Abraham, it's really mysterious to factor in why it is that this lady--the shady lady from Jericho--should ever come to believe in the God of Israel. And when you read in Joshua chapter 2, you will be as mystified and as gratified, I hope, as I was, to recognize that here from the lips of a Canaanite woman with a shady lifestyle comes this great Israeli declaration of the significance of a mighty God of Israel.

Somehow or another, in the goodness of God, she got it! And she believed it! And having believed it, she demonstrated her belief. And it is a wonderful reminder in conclusion that when you take the two witnesses called to the stand--one from a religious background, at least over time, and one from an irreligious background, a man and a woman, one man of significance and repute, another lady of disrepute--both called to the stand to testify to what? To testify to the amazing grace of God. And if you doubt just how amazing it is, this is your final homework assignment.

Read The Genealogy of Christ in Matthew chapter 1, and you don't have to get too far down the list to find Reha. Reha is an ancestress of the Messiah Jesus! What kind of wonderful God is this, who reaches down into the lives of people and picks them up and grants them faith and changes them? Has he changed you? You see, the faith that James has articulated here in chapter 2 is a reminder to us that the church is not a club for people that are all sorted out. The church is not a club.

That would be like saying that a hospital is only for doctors and radiologists, or that a cemetery is only for undertakers. The church is not a club for people that have got it all together. The church is a refuge for folks who have been rescued and redeemed and set right.

And Rehab's past was no barrier. The life of faith is more than a private, long-past transaction, albeit a transaction of the heart with God. It says, James, genuine faith is a life of active consecration in the obedience which holds nothing back from God and holds nothing back from human need.

It is a faith which holds nothing back from God. Here is my Son, my only Son. He's yours.

Somehow or another, you will take care of your promise, because you are a sovereign God. I give him to you. And holds nothing back from human need.

You can stay up on my roof. That would be fine. I'll get you out through a window later on.

Would you like something to eat? And the question James is asking is, Reader, is that your faith? Is that your faith? Father, we thank you for the clarity of the Bible. We apologize for any lack of clarity in the one who talks about the Bible or each of us as we listen to the Bible. And we pray that since we have sung about our hope being built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and his righteousness, that that may really have been our testimony to faith.

So that the source of it is in your amazing grace, and the ground of it is in the blood shed by your Son, and the means of it is through our hand reaching out in faith to take hold of that which you have provided, and the effect of it is to produce fruit in keeping with our repentance. So, come and do your work within each of our lives, we pray, and in our life as a church family. Forgive us, Lord, when we look far more like a marina sailing our little religious boats around, and have lost sight of the fact that you have made us a rescue station, that you have made us a lifeboat center for wrestlers on the troubled sea of life.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with all who believe, today and forevermore. Amen. That concludes this message.

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