

Introduction

In the last sermon I looked at what faith is. We looked at five statements about biblical faith.

1. Faith' means having confidence and trust – belief in action
2. Faith means having confidence and trust in someone – God
3. It is not a `leap in the dark' which a person must take without thinking.
It is trust in a God whom we believe to be trustworthy.
4. Faith means entrusting your life to this trustworthy God - Abraham
5. Faith means seeing things from God's perspective – the Centurion

We asked not whether we had faith but rather whether or not the things we believe and trust are *faith-worthy and true*.

We looked at the Hebrew word *emunah* אֱמוּנָה and saw how it related to steadiness. We saw that faith takes us beyond the things we can conceptualise and understand. Finally we looked at the statements by Paul and James to see not a contradiction but a complementarity which combines faith and action.

The combined teaching can be summed up in the statements:

“Not faith plus works but faith that works.”

“Faith alone saves but the faith that saves is not alone”

Today I want to look at some aspects of faith that are demonstrated in the life experience of our father in faith, Abraham. (Romans 4:11).

Both Paul and James make reference to the following statement about Abraham's faith:

"And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

(Gen 15:6; cf. Rom 4:3; James 2:23)

The letter of James.

James was the leader of the Jerusalem church, a devout Jew and the half brother of Jesus. He wrote this epistle sometime before 62 CE (Josephus records his death at this time). He wrote to believers who had been dispersed from Jerusalem in the persecution following Stephen's death. The letter is written by a devout Jew to Jewish believers and we should therefore expect principles and teachings that reflect Jewish faith and practice. James does not disappoint.

In the first chapter James establishes the foundational principle of the letter (**1:19-27**) that hearing must be accompanied by doing, this is continued (**2:14-26**) by faith that must be attended by action. This is a foundational principle of the Sh'ma. *“if you **listen obediently** to my commandments”* and *“a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, **so as to do them** and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot.”* This epistle leaves no place for a religion that is mere mental acceptance of truth.

Like Paul, James uses Abraham as the example of saving faith. (**James 2:21-23**)

The passage (**2:14-26**) divides itself into three sections:

- the proposition (vv. **14-17**);

- the argument (vv. **18-25**);
- the concluding statement (v. **26**).

James first states his proposition interrogatively. The two questions posed in this verse actually declare that faith not accompanied by good deeds is of no saving value whatsoever. The questions create the hypothetical case of a person who "*claims to have*" genuine saving faith. It is important to note that James does not say that the person actually has a genuine faith. The question "Can such faith save him?" is so structured in the Greek text (using the negative particle *me* interrogatively) that it expects a negative answer. James is asking, "This faith can't save him, can it?" Faith without works cannot save; it takes faith that proves itself in the deeds it produces. James is not speaking of deeds performed to earn merit before God (as Paul uses the term in **Rom 3:20**). Genuine faith is an essential part of being born again and therefore this kind of faith affects the believer's behaviour.

Abraham's faith was genuine and it affected his relationship with God. The obvious question is what was so compelling about Abraham's faith that made the difference?

2:21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

James is referring to the story in **Genesis 22**, where God told Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac:

10. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.
11. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.
12. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."
13. Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.
14. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."
15. The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time
16. and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,
17. I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies,
18. and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Abraham's faith in God was proven because he was willing to do the difficult thing of sacrificing his only son Isaac. His faith was justified, and he demonstrated the genuineness of his faith. The promise is repeated again that Abraham's offspring would be numerous.

It's interesting that James uses Abraham as the example of a person being justified by works while Paul uses Abraham as the example of being justified by faith:

1. *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?*
2. *If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God.*
3. *What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*

Roman 4:1-3

When Paul uses this example he uses it to illustrate how we as people are justified before God by receiving our salvation through faith. When James refers to this example he is talking about how our faith is being justified and branded "genuine" by producing good works.

Abrahams Faith – Obedience

1. He left his country - **Heb 11:8**
2. He sojourned in a foreign land - **Heb 11:9-10**
3. He offered his son Isaac - **Heb 11:17**; cf. **James 2:21-24**
-- Abraham's faith was not a dead faith (cf. Ja 2:20,26), but a dynamic faith expressing itself in obedience!

Illustration: Saving Faith (Charles Spurgeon)

The spectacular Niagara Falls have been spoken of in every part of the world. But while they are marvelous to hear of and wonderful to see, they have been very destructive to human life, when by accident some have been carried down the cataract. Some years ago, two men were in a boat and found themselves being carried so swiftly down the current that they would inevitably be borne down and dashed to pieces.

At last, however, one man was saved by a rope that was floated out to him, which he grasped. Another rope was floated to the other man, but at the same instant the rope came into his hand, a log floated by him. The thoughtless and confused man, instead of seizing the rope, laid hold on the log. It was a fatal mistake. They were both in imminent peril, but the one was drawn to shore because he had a connection with the people on the land, while the other, clinging to the loose, floating log, was borne irresistibly along, and was never heard of afterward.

Saving Faith has a connection with Christ. Christ is on the shore, so to speak, holding the rope, and as we lay hold of it with the hand of our confidence, he pulls us to shore. But our good works having no connection with Christ are drifted along down to the gulf of despair. Grapple our virtues as tightly as we may, even with hooks of steel, they cannot avail us in the least degree. They are the disconnected log that has no hold on the heavenly shore.

Abraham's Faith – Beyond reason

1. It made the fulfillment of the promise of God void
2. It was against his fatherly instinct (your son whom you love)
3. It was against his practice (child sacrifice)

Abraham Was Growing In Faith

1. There were times when he was weak in his faith

- a. He had Sarah his wife tell a half-truth to save his life - **Gen 12:11-20; 20:1-18**
- b. He questioned God when he and Sarah did not have children - **Gen 15:2-3**
- c. He showed weak faith in the case of Hagar - **Gen 16:1-4**
- d. He offered an alternative to God when he thought it would be impossible for he and Sarah to have children - **Gen 17:17-18**

2. But God was patient with Abraham, and he grew in his application of faith

- a. He had faith, even against hope, and was able to conceive - **Rom 4:18-22**
- b. He had faith that God could raise Isaac from the dead, and so was willing to offer him as commanded - He 11:17-19

"The Faith Of Abraham" was not a static faith, but an ever-growing faith that came through being "a friend of God" (cf. James 2:23)

James 2:22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete (teleioo – consummate, finish, fulfil, make perfect) by what he did.

Action makes faith complete

Sometimes your faith isn't all that special until you have to prove your faith by acting upon it.

Illustration: Blondin the tightrope walker.

Jean Francois Gravelet was born February 28, 1824 in Hesdin, France. When he was five years old he was sent to the École de Gymnase at Lyon, and after six months' training as an acrobat he made his first public appearance as "the Little Wonder." He became known as the Great Blondin.

In 1859 he announced that he would do the most amazing of all feats, he would cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope 1,100 feet (335 m) long, 160 feet above the water.

On June 30, 1859 the rope was in position and at five o'clock in the afternoon Blondin started the trip that was to make history. He stopped in the middle, lowered a rope to the *Maid of the Mist*, pulled up a bottle of water and sat down while he refreshed himself. He began his ascent toward the Canadian shore, paused, steadied the balancing pole and suddenly executed a back somersault. The crowd 'screamed', women 'fainted', those near the rope 'cried' and begged him to come in.

He crossed the Falls several times, each time making it more difficult. He crossed the rope on a bicycle, walking blindfolded, pushing a wheelbarrow, stopping to cook an omelet in the center, and making the trip with his hands and feet manacled.

His most daring crossing came when he announced that he would carry a man across on his back. One man agreed to let him do it. It was his manager, Harry Colcord.

The manager who grew in faith!