

# COMMENTARY

## UNDERSTANDING JAMES 2:14-26 (Pt. 1)

### Removing the Theological Tension Between Faith & Good Works

by Ron Merryman

**P**erhaps no portion of Scripture is more misrepresented than James 2:14-26.

Roman Catholic theologians see it as the Achilles Heel of the Reformation. They insist that this text is proof that faith plus good works bring salvation. And, of course, if they are correct, then James is in conflict with the Apostle Paul who clearly taught that eternal salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

Martin Luther had great problems with this passage. He even questioned the canonicity of James for he felt that "it contradicted St. Paul and all other Scripture in giving righteousness to works;" hence he dubbed it "an epistle of straw and destitute of evangelic character."

Proponents of "Lordship Salvation" use it to "prove" that righteous behavior distinguishes true saving faith from counterfeit faith. Stated another way: the absence of good works is to them a sure indication of an unregenerate condition. In their view, the man in verse 14 who says he has faith, but has no good works, is lost: he is a person who may have an "intellectual" faith, but not a saving faith. His is a spurious or counterfeit faith. Within Bible-believing circles today, this interpretation is the most popular.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Problem and My Purpose

These understandings arise from the same incorrect assumption: that James is speaking of salvation from hell (eternal destiny) and justification in the forensic sense (as Paul did in Romans 3 & 4). In each and all of these misrepresentations, the text is ripped out of its context, given a concern that was not the intent of James, then applied to suit the commentator's dogma.

In this monograph, I will attempt to show from the text and context:

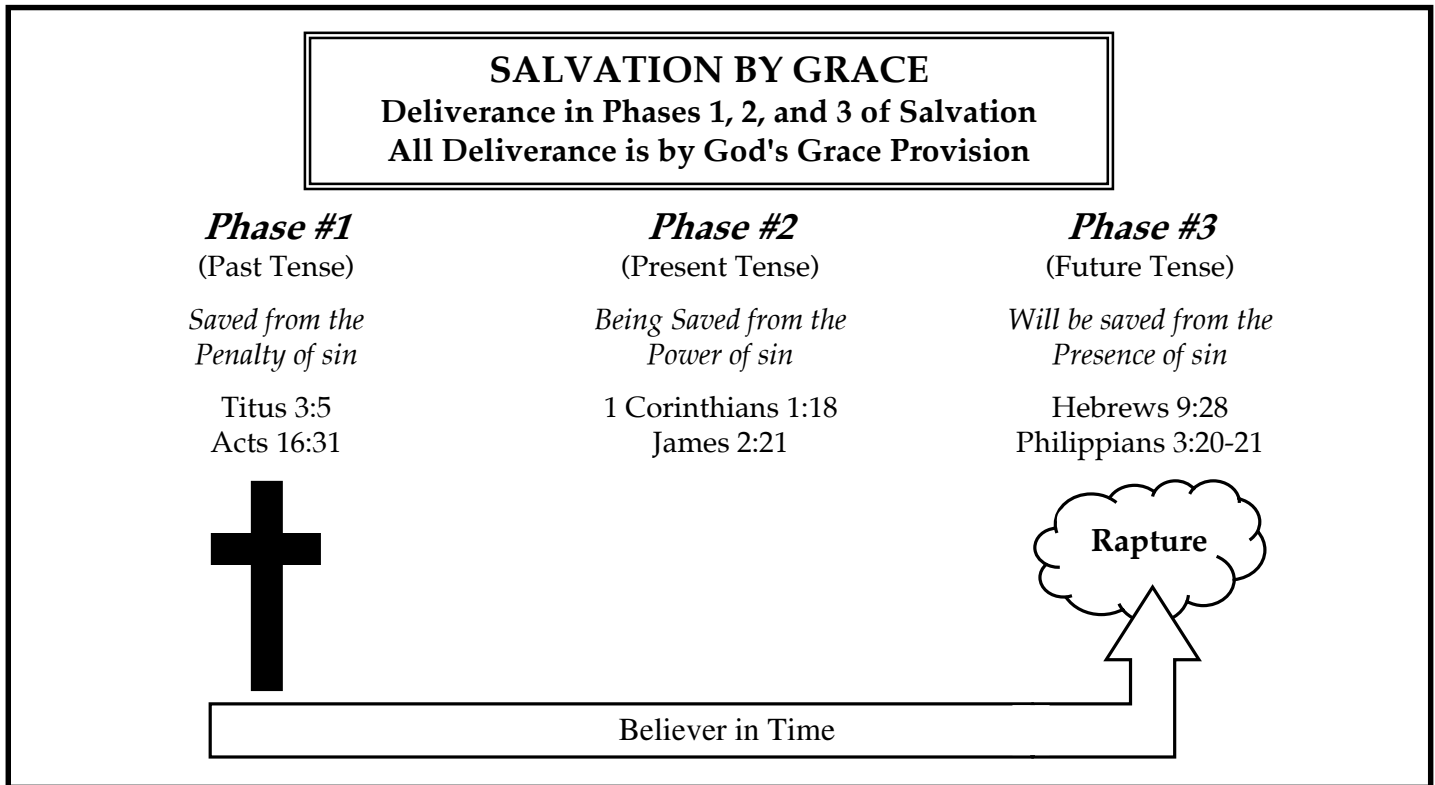
1. that the faith spoken of in James 2:14ff is always the faith of a Christian, not the initial faith of an unsaved sinner in response to the Gospel, nor simply an "intellectual" faith that does not save.<sup>2</sup>
2. that in reference to this faith, James is not addressing the eternal destiny of his readers, rather their profitability and productivity in this life.
3. that James' intention is practice: he is encouraging Believers to practice their faith via good works.
4. that Believers dare not minimize good works, nor make them irrelevant.
5. that James and Paul are in complete agreement that...
  - a. justification (forensic/heavenly) before God is by faith alone in Christ alone, and,
  - b. justification (practical/earthly) before men is by faith-life-produced works.

**James is not saying faith does not exist: it does exist, but it is separated from God's intent, hence dead or profitless to mankind.**

Before we look at this passage, it is imperative that we understand that salvation from sin and its consequences is in its total scope a real deliverance from the same. That is, salvation is deliverance from 1) the penalty of sin (spiritual death or eternal separation from God), 2) deliverance from the power of sin in the present, and 3) deliverance from the presence of sin in the future. These three aspects of deliverance are three phases of salvation which are doctrinally developed in the

New Testament as 1) Justification, 2) Sanctification, and 3) Glorification. Figure #1 diagrams this scriptural understanding of salvation. Please note the phases and tenses (past, present, and future) of salvation. The reader of scripture must always determine to which phase a salvation passage refers.

Figure #1 Three Phases or Tenses of Salvation Spoken of in Scripture



### James 2:14: The Text & Its Context

Let us give careful consideration of the text of James 2:14-26 and its context.

*What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man<sup>3</sup> say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?<sup>4</sup> (James 2:14)*

In this verse, James raises two questions about faith in relation to works.

**(v 14a) Question #1:** My brethren, what does it **profit** if a man says he has faith but he has no works?

Observations:

1. James' concern is profit manward from a faith that is not productive.
2. The question & concern is directed to "my Brethren" (i.e., Believers), as is the entire book.

Christians are clearly his focus, as in the following passages.

-1:2 "My brethren," (brothers & sisters in Christ) – in Phase #1 or #2 of salvation?

- 1:3 "the trying of your faith worketh patience" – Phase #1 or #2?
- 1:12 James gives them encouragement under testing – Phase #1 or #2?
- 1:18 "Of His own will, He (God) begat us (James and his readers) by the Word of truth" –Phase #1 or #2?
- 1:21 Command: "Receive the implanted word which is able to save/deliver your souls" – Phase #1 or #2?
- 1:22 Command: "Be doers of the word & not just listeners" – Phase #1 or #2?
- 2:1 Command: "My Brethren, hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ... with respect (or favoritism) toward persons" – Phase #1 or #2?

**POINT:** As with the commands and exhortations of James up to this point, the questions that he poses in 2:14 are to stimulate thought by believers in phase #2 about the relationship between faith and works as they impact other believers; about being word-doers and not just listeners. **These questions have nothing to do with unbelievers.**

**(v 14b) Question #2:** “Can faith SAVE him (A BELIEVER)?”: that is, “The faith that is without works is continually not able to save/deliver him, is it?” Anticipated answer: “No.”

THE INTERPRETIVE ISSUE: “deliver” or “save” him from what?

- IS HELL/ETERNITY IN VIEW?    YES    NO
- OR IS DELIVERANCE FROM SINS  
DEGRADATION IN PHASE #2 IN VIEW?

OBVIOUSLY THE LATER: PRECISELY AS IN 1:21 where believers are encouraged to “*receive the engrafted or implanted word which is able to save or deliver your souls!*”<sup>5</sup> James indicates that there is a reciprocity between Word-produced-works, between being doers of the Word, between faith-life-produced works and deliverance of the soul from sin’s hang-ups. It is this deliverance (in Phase #2) that he has in mind in 2:14.

### **2:15, 16 James Illustrates the Barrenness of A Believer’s Faith Without Works**

*If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? (James 2:15-16)*

**(v 15, 16)** Again, James addresses believers and their good works or lack thereof. He raises the issue of brothers and sisters in Christ who have unmet need for the vital essentials of life: in no way could the “one of you” who ignores their obvious need be an unbeliever!

James has the faith of Christians in view in this entire paragraph, not faith in the Gospel that makes one a Christian. He asks, “WHAT **PROFIT** or **BENEFIT** IS YOUR FAITH IN THIS SCENARIO?”

### **2:17 James’ First Conclusion**

*Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone (being by itself, (NASV). (James 2:17)*

**(v 17)** His First Conclusion: “So, indeed, this faith if not having works (production of Divine good in life) is dead;” that is, separated from profit or benefit manward, separated from the Divine intent. It stands alone, which is not God’s intent for faith.

“Dead” here is used in its normal scriptural sense, that of separation, not annihilation or lack of existence. Biblically, spiritual death is separation from God, not annihilation. Physical death is separation of the soul-spirit from the physical body, not annihilation nor non-existence. The second death is spiritual death perpetuated into eternity, not annihilation nor the end of existence. James is not saying faith does not exist: it does exist, but it is separated from God’s intent, hence dead or profitless to mankind.

“Faith” from God’s perspective is not to “be alone.” James is affirming that there is a directive purpose of God in saving men by grace through faith – that good works might result.

HE IS IN TOTAL AGREEMENT WITH THE APOSTLE PAUL WHO STATES:

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2: 8-10).*

Did you notice: Believers are created by God in Christ Jesus unto good works. The new birth and its result, the new creation, is not created by good works (the Roman Catholic position), but unto good works. By design, this is one of the directive goals of God for personal faith in Christ. Paul reaffirms the principle in Titus 3:5-8:

*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works.*

**James and Paul agree; between them is no theological tension!**

*These things are good and profitable unto men.*  
(Titus 3:5-8)

James and Paul agree; between them is no theological tension!

### Summary Thus Far

James' concern in this paragraph is highlighted in the word "*profit*." "What profit," he asks (in v. 14), "is faith without works?" This profit is manward (to "brothers" & "sisters") as he illustrates in verses 15 & 16 ending with the question (paraphrased): "What does this non-works-response profit the needy Brother or Sister?" James concludes (v. 17): "So also, the faith (without works as I stated in v.14) is dead, being alone." That is, this Christian man's faith is separated from God's intent: benefit or profit manward. Nor can this faith have the ameliorative benefits for its possessor that God designed in faith-produced-good-works: it cannot save/deliver him in Phase #2 Christianity (v.14). It is dead, separated from the Divine intent (same use of the word "save" in 1:21). ■

This article will continue in the July/August issue. Ron will cover James 2:21-26.

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Currently, John MacArthur is probably the most widely read of those who promote Lordship salvation. But practically all those who follow Puritan/Reformed theology concur and

take the same view of James 2:14-26. Though not in the same camp as MacArthur, others like Charles Ryrie and Robert Lightner (men whose writings I value greatly) teach the popular interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Current writers who agree that the focus of James in this paragraph is not on one who professes a spurious or counterfeit faith, rather on a true Believer, include Earl D. Radmacher, Zane Hodges, Charles Bing, D. Edmund Hiebert, & Martin Dibelius.

<sup>3</sup> "a man" translates the indefinite pronoun "tis." James uses "tis" to refer to a Believer in 1:23 ("any"), 26 ("any man"); 2:18 ("a man"); 3:2 ("any man"). He is raising the issue in 2:14 of what any Believer might say, not an unbeliever.

<sup>4</sup> King James Version as are all scripture quotes in this monograph unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> It is perfectly obvious that the command "receive the engrafted word which is able to save your souls" (1:21) is/was to be received by Christians, not unbelievers, and categorically refers to Phase 2 deliverance. Students of the Greek text should note the similar construction of these two verses: 1:21... δέξασθε τὸν ἔμφυτον λόγον τὸν δυνάμενον σώσαι τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν and 2:14 μὴ δύνανται ἡ πίστις σώσαι αὐτόν. Even the reference to "the saving of the soul" in 5:19-20 is the soul of a fellow-believer! Σωζω in James 1:21; 2:14; & 5:20 refers to Phase 2 salvation: not Phase #1. The Lordship salvation advocates miss this critical point as do their Roman Catholic counterparts!

Ron Merryman served the Lord in Bible colleges for 11 years, 3 of those as Acting President of Western Bible College. He also pastored Holly Hills Bible Church in Denver, Colorado, for 14 years. Ron currently teaches in the G.I.B.S., a ministry of Duluth Bible Church.