

Ephesians: What's God Saying to You? What are You Going to Do About It?

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I. Introduction

There's no question that once God gives you eternal life, it can never be taken from you, no matter what you or anyone else does (John 10:28-29; Romans 8:38-39). But did you know that God could kill you for living in sin? If you're a child of God, who refuses to obey Him, He could take your life.

II. Ephesians: What is God Saying to You and What are You Going to Do About It?

Chapter 5

5:5-6, though this passage in Ephesians sounds like God is threatening our salvation if we live in sin, we've seen that this is not what God says here. What about James 2:14-17, does it say that if we don't have enough good works, then we're doomed to hell?

Does God either question or threaten our eternal salvation? James 2:14-17 is one of the passages some use to argue that if we don't live a good life, then we're not "really" saved. Why? Because if we "really" believed in Jesus as our Savior, then our life will reflect it because James 2:14-17 clearly says, "Faith without works is dead." So, it's true that we're saved by faith alone but the faith that saves us is never alone, i.e., it always accompanies good works. So, if we *really* believed, then our life should show it by the good works we do. Is this true? Does God point to our sinful life and question our eternal salvation? NO.

James 2:14-17, if you recall, there are two questions we need to ask concerning such passages: Who is the audience? and What is God talking about? So, who is James writing to, who is his audience? There are several things James says about his audience: they are his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, 1:2 (1:16; 2:1, etc., etc.), they have the right to ask God for wisdom and He'll give it to them, 1:5, God is the Father who gave birth to them, 1:18, they have God's Word planted in them, 1:21, they possess the face of the new birth, 1:23, and at the beginning of the very passage in question, James again addresses them as his brethren, 2:14. Therefore, James' audience consists of born-again individuals whose Father is God and therefore, whose eternal destiny is 100% certain. Thus, whatever he says to them in 2:14-17, it's not designed to question or threaten their eternal salvation. God cannot threaten their salvation because they cannot go to hell; they are God's beloved children.

Second question, what is God talking about in 2:14-17; is He talking about salvation from hell or something else? Since this passage mentions salvation and the concept of 'faith without works is dead' some believe that God is saying to those who *profess* to be Christians but really aren't, "You better make sure that you produce good works; if you truly had faith in My Son, then your life will show it. If you don't live a good life, then it means your faith in My Son was dead and you're not really saved. After all, 'Faith without works is dead!'" Is this what God is saying? Not at all. In order to find out what God means here, we need to answer two questions about this passage: What salvation is God talking about? and What does "faith without works is dead" actually mean in its context? These two issues didn't originate in 2:14; James started talking about them from the beginning of his letter.

So what led James to say “Faith without works is dead,” that a dead faith can’t save you? What led to it is the reality of how faith works, especially faith in what God says. From the very beginning James tells his audience that unless they add something to their faith, their faith will be useless:

1:2-4, James urges his audience to consider it joy when facing their trials because the testing of their **faith** can turn them into individuals who can handle anything—**Question: what must they add to their faith, their belief that God can make them stronger through their trials? Contentment (“joy”) and Certainty that God will make them stronger through their trial; if they lack these, then their faith will be useless.**

1:5-8, if any of them need wisdom to face their trial, they can ask God who will give it to them; but they must ask in **faith**, without any doubt, otherwise, God won’t give them anything—**Question: what work must they add to their belief that if they ask God for wisdom without doubt, He’ll give it to them? Certainty! If they doubt, then their faith will be useless. In other words, you have to act on what you believe: believing you can lose weight by exercising won’t help you one bit unless you actually exercise!**

1:9-11, the poor have reason to glory because God uses this trial to exalt them (1:4; 2:5); the rich also because God uses humility to keep them from being destroyed by their wealth—**will the poor and rich act on these beliefs or will their faith be useless?**

1:12-13, God will reward those who endure their tempting trials but they must not blame God for their temptation because God can’t be tempted nor does He tempt anyone—**will those undergoing tempting trials apply what they believe, i.e., will they trust that God will reward them if they endure or will they blame Him for the temptation?**

1:14-15, the truth is that we’re tempted by our own desires and when we give in to them, it gives birth to sin and when sin is fully grown, it brings death—this is where James begins to talk about salvation; notice what the danger is: death—**will we add works to our faith, i.e., will we act on our belief that God will kill us if we keep sinning? Or will we fail to act on our faith and continue sinning and end up dead (rendering our faith useless)?**

1:16-18, we must not get it twisted; God doesn’t give bad gifts like temptation. Instead, He gives good and perfect gifts; this is His character and it never changes. In fact, one of the greatest gifts He gave us is life: by His own Word, He gave birth to us.

1:19-21, in light of all this, God gives us our marching orders: we must be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath because man’s wrath can’t produce God’s righteousness. Thus, we must lay aside every sin and receive with meekness God’s implanted Word, which is able to save our “souls” from sin’s consequence: death, 1:15. James spells out the salvation he’s talking about; it’s a salvation that will save our “souls,” which is an unfortunate translation. It should’ve been rendered “lives” which is in keeping with the context: the danger is death not hell. The original Greek word *psuche* can mean physical life or soul. Thus far, James hasn’t mentioned hell or that our souls are in danger of going to hell because of our sin. However, he has mentioned that sin can lead to our physical death; that’s the danger concerning on-going sin. That’s the danger James’ audience faces: if they allow their sin to become fully grown, it will kill them. This is why he’s urging his audience to lay aside every sin and instead receive God’s Word, which will save them from death. But perhaps this is reading something into the text that isn’t there? After all, the Greek word could easily mean “soul.” How do we know for sure that James means physical life and not “soul”?

Let's let James answer our question. Notice what James says about this very issue at the end of his letter: what will happen if you turn an on-going sinner from the error of his way? You will "save a soul from death," 5:20. Notice: the person will save a soul from death not hell; therefore, what James means by *psuche* is physical life. This also means that the salvation in 2:14-17 is not from hell but physical death.

The rest of chapter 1 and the first half of chapter 2 reinforce the reality that exists between God's Word/faith/salvation and sin/death. That is, you can't just believe God's Word; you have to actually apply it for it to save you from the deadly consequences of sin. In other words, faith without works is useless.

1:22-25, you can't just believe what God says; you have to actually do it. To believe and not do is to forget your true identity (i.e., "the face of his birth" as a child of God) and live like someone else (as a child of the Devil). But the one who believes God's Word and adds to their faith works, this one will be blessed in everything he does—**notice, what are "works" according to 1:25? Applying your faith, doing what it says. Thus, there's a consequence for failing to apply what you believe; instead of blessings, you'll get the consequences of your sin.**

1:26, if your faith tells you to control your tongue but you fail to control it, then your faith is useless—**without the work of controlling your tongue, your faith is dead.**

1:27, but if you obey your belief that you should help orphans and widows and keep yourself unspotted from the world's sin, then your faith will keep you pure and undefiled, **i.e., faith + works (re. orphans, widows, and the world's sin) = salvation from impurity and defilement.**

2:1-7, in the first sentence, James basically says that they need to apply what their faith says about partiality, i.e., they need to add works to this faith. Then he points to their #1 sin regarding partiality: they're discriminating against the poor. Thus, James urges his audience not to sin against the poor by favoring the rich over them. To treat the poor this way is an affront to God who has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of His Kingdom—**will they do what their faith tells them about the poor or will they show partiality?**

2:8-13, God's Word says things like, "Do not commit adultery," but it also says not to be partial. You can't obey the first command and ignore the second; this still leaves you a sinner who will have to face an unmerciful Judge for refusing to show mercy to the poor—**there's a consequence for failing to add works to your belief that you should show mercy to the poor.**

2:14-17, having made crystal clear that willfully sinning against what you believe comes at a high price, James comes to the climax of his argument as he gives a vivid example of how useless our faith is when we fail to apply it: if a naked and hungry sister comes to us for aid and all we do is say, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but never feed or clothe her, what good is our belief that we should help our brethren? Will our faith which lacks action save them from nakedness and hunger and us from God's judgment? NO!—**notice, James is not talking about hell but real life problems and the consequences for failing to apply our faith.**

III. Conclusion

If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.