

James: What *Salvation and Death* is James Talking About? Part 1

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I. Introduction

Is it true that after you become a Christian you'll never live in willful disobedience to Christ? Is it true that if your life lacks good works, it means that you're not eternally saved? Is that what James teaches in his letter? Is he talking about eternal salvation and death or something else?

II. James: What Salvation and Death is James Talking About?

Some believe James is talking about eternal salvation and a genuine or "true" faith vs. a "false" faith, e.g., Gotquestions.org says this about the question, "Why is faith without works dead?"

James says, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26). Faith without works is a dead faith because the lack of works reveals an unchanged life or a spiritually dead heart. There are many verses that say that true saving faith will result in a transformed life, that faith is demonstrated by the works we do. How we live reveals what we believe and whether the faith we profess to have is a living faith.

James 2:14–26 is sometimes taken out of context in an attempt to create a works-based system of righteousness, but that is contrary to many other passages of Scripture. James is not saying that our works make us righteous before God but that real saving faith is demonstrated by good works. Works are not the cause of salvation; works are the evidence of salvation. Faith in Christ always results in good works. The person who claims to be a Christian but lives in willful disobedience to Christ has a false or dead faith and is not saved. Paul basically says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. James contrasts two different types of faith—true faith that saves and false faith that is dead.¹

Is it true that true saving faith will result in a transformed life, that works are the evidence of our eternal salvation, and that faith in Christ always results in good works?

Who's the audience in James? Let us begin by asking who the audience is in James. James and his audience are brethren who have been born again and have the same father: God the Father (1:2, 16-18, 23; 3:9). God's Word is implanted in them (1:21). They have the same Lord: Jesus Christ (2:1). The same spirit dwells in them: the Holy Spirit (4:5). The Lord urges them to access His healing power (5:14-18). And God the Father urges them to return their sinning brethren to His Word of truth in order to save their lives from death (5:19-20). Why is it important to know who the audience is? Because everything James says, including the strong language of warning regarding death and salvation, is directed at individuals who are without a shadow of a doubt saved eternally.

¹<https://www.gotquestions.org/faith-without-works-dead.html>.

Thus, James' comments such as, "sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death," "receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls," "For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy," "faith without works is dead," "You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain," "Adulterers and adulteresses!" "Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God," "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded," and "Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire" are all directed at individuals who cannot lose their salvation precisely because they are saved eternally. Nevertheless they may experience the consequences that James mentions, i.e., their sin may kill them, their implanted word may not save their souls, God's judgement of them may be without mercy, their faith will be dead if it lacks works, they may be adulterers and adulteresses, they may be God's enemies, they may have soiled hearts and a double-mind, and their wealth may eat their flesh like fire. But if hell is not the threat, what is?

What salvation is James talking about? Since James is not talking about eternal salvation, he must refer to some other salvation. The first time James mentions salvation is in 1:21 where he urges them to "receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls." In 1:21 James is not discussing salvation in a vacuum; there's a context to it and the context is sin: the verse begins with James telling his audience to lay aside their sin. Why? Because if they don't, God will kill them (1:15). So the salvation James refers to is physical not eternal. But what about the word "soul" in 1:21? It comes from the Greek word *psuche*, which can mean soul or physical life/body (e.g. Philippians 2:30). In James 1:21 it means physical life not soul.

The next time James uses salvation is in 2:14. He begins by saying, "What good is it?" and then presents an individual who has faith but lacks works and then asks, "Can faith save him?" The question is, "Save him from what?" and why does James think it's useless to have faith without works? The answer to both questions is found in the example he gives in the following verses: if a naked and hungry brother or sister comes to you and all you do is say, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but fail to cloth or feed them, what good is it? Notice: James ends with the same question he started with, "What good is it?" His answer, "It's useless!" which is why he concludes, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead," i.e., it's useless! It's clear that this faith-without-works won't save the naked and hungry brother from starving or being cold. But from what will this faith-without-works fail to save the individual who refused to cloth and feed his brother? From God's discipline for sinning against his brother, possibly including death (1:15). Further, the idea "faith without works is dead" didn't begin in 2:14, it started in 1:26 (one might argue that it began in 1:2). At the end of chapter one, after telling his audience to apply God's Word and not simply listening to a bunch of sermons (1:22-24), James tells them that the religion of a person who attends church religiously but fails to control their mouth is useless! Pure religion before God is to provide for the less fortunate (1:27). In other words, pure religion is to actually apply God's Word not simply believe it, that is, faith (God's Word believed) without works (God's Word applied) is dead/useless. It won't help an orphan or widow or a naked and hungry brother.

III. Conclusion

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.