

James: What *Salvation and Death* is James Talking About? Part 2

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA February 20, 2019

I. Introduction

Is it true that if you're a true Christian, you'll never live in willful disobedience to Christ? Is it true that if your life lacks good works, it means that you were never really converted and therefore on your way to hell? Further, is that what James is discussing in his epistle when he mentions salvation and death? Or is he addressing some other vital point of the Christian life?

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

Some think that when James says "faith without works is dead" he's talking about how you can tell who is eternally saved or not. Those who are truly saved inevitably possess a transformed life which produces good works. Those who lack good works reveal a spiritually dead heart on its way to hell. They won't say that good works save you; but they will say that good works are evidence that you are truly saved. No works = No eternal salvation. Is this true and is this what James is addressing when he mentions salvation and death?

Who's the audience in James? Among other things, this audience has been born of God and His Spirit lives in them (1:18; 3:9; 4:5). So whatever dire warnings James gives this audience (including "faith without works is dead"), they have God as their Father and His Spirit dwells in them, all of which means they are eternally saved. This also means that all of the sinful behavior (actual and potential) James mentions—like submitting to Satan instead of God (4:1-10)—may be true of them. Now, if James is not talking about going to hell for living in sin and lacking good works, what is he talking about?

What salvation is James talking about? The first time James mentions save is in 1:21 where he urges his audience to lay aside their sin and receive with meekness God's implanted Word which will then save their souls. Nothing in the context suggests that James is talking about your soul being saved from hell. He is, however, talking about sin and what it can do to you: it can kill you (1:15). Thus, "soul" in 1:21 is not a reference to one's soul but physical life, which is a legitimate meaning of the Greek word *psuche*, which many bible translations render "soul" in James 1:21.

The second time James uses the word "save" is in 2:14. It's important to note that James begins and ends the discussion of "faith without works" with the question, "What good is it?" James' point is that it's useless to believe something and then fail to apply it, which is why he gives a vivid example that demonstrates this: if a naked and hungry brother needs your help and all you do is say a blessing over them, it's useless. This is why James says, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead." In other words, James is telling you what he means by, "faith without works is dead." He means that it's useless to believe something yet fail to apply it. But this discussion of believing something and not applying it didn't start at 2:14. It began in chapter one when James told his audience that sin could kill them if left unchecked. The only way to avoid death due to sin is to apply God's Word not merely to hear it (1:22). To simply believe God's Word and fail to apply it is useless (1:15-26).

The next two times James mentions salvation are in 4:12 and 5:15. The first one is a statement of fact that God is the only Savior or Destroyer, thus, we mustn't judge our brethren. The second regards the Lord saving a person from illness due to the elders' prayer of faith. The first example may involve salvation from hell but not exclusively and faith or works is not at issue but sin is. The second is a physical salvation from an illness that may've been caused by sin, which directly relates to how the letter began: salvation from the deadly consequences of sin. The final time James mentions salvation is in 5:20. This one clearly shows that the salvation James is talking about in his letter is physical not eternal. He urges the audience to return a sinning brother to God's Truth. If they do, they "will save a soul from death," the same physical death he mentioned in the beginning which is caused by ongoing sin (1:15). The only way to avoid such a death is to receive with meekness God's Truth "which is able to save your souls" (1:21).

What death is James talking about? From the discussion above, it's clear that James is talking about a physical death due to sin, not an eternal one. In fact, sin cannot, nor will it lead to eternal damnation. All sin was paid for by the blood of Christ (John 1:29; 3:16). Sin does not cause eternal death, lack of eternal life does (Revelation 20:15).

Additionally, James is not just talking about physical death in his letter, he's also referring to the deadly consequences of sin. That is, when you're a hearer of the Word (faith) only and not a doer of the Word (works), you'll live in death:

- You'll be double-minded and unstable (1:6-8)
- You'll receive nothing from the Lord when you pray (1:7)
- Your greed for wealth will destroy your wealth and/or kill you physically (1:10-11)
- Sin will kill you bit by bit until it actually kills you physically (1:15)
- You'll be self-deceived (1:22, 26)
- You'll forget that you're a child of God and thereby your access to the King and His power (1:23-24)
- Your religion will be useless (1:26)
- You'll fail to keep yourself unspotted by this wicked world (1:27)
- You'll discriminate against the poor (2:1-4)
- You'll become an evil judge (2:4)
- You'll be judged by the Lord without mercy at His judgment seat (2:13)
- You'll leave your naked and hungry brother starving and cold (2:16)
- You won't be saved from God's wrath for not helping your fellow believers (2:14-17)
- You'll fail to have an impact on the unbelievers watching you, i.e., you'll fail to justify your Christian identity before others (2:21-24, 25)
- You'll become an enemy of God (2:21-23; 4:4)
- You'll fail to control your tongue (3:1-12)
- You'll follow Satan's wisdom instead of God's (3:13-18)

- You'll war, fight, lust, murder, covet, try to use God to get your sinful desires, and befriend the sinful world instead of God (4:1-1-4)
- You'll submit to the Devil instead of God (4:7-10)
- You'll speak evil of and judge your brethren (4:11-12)
- You'll boast as if *you* controlled your future instead of God (4:13-17)
- Your greed will lead to your demise (5:3, 5)
- You'll hoard wealth and mistreat and kill others to get more (5:1-6)

This is not a unique view of death; this concept of death is found elsewhere in Scripture. There are only two choices of where you live each moment of your life: with Christ in His Kingdom of life or with Satan in his kingdom death: Romans 6:21, 23; 7:8-13; 8:6-13; 1 Timothy 5:6; 1 John 3:14.

What kind of faith is James talking about? Some believe that James is talking about two kinds of faith, one that is true/genuine/real and one that is false/ungenuine/non-existent. Is this the comparison that James makes or is he simply talking about a living faith vs. a dead faith? When James says "dead faith" he's not talking about a non-existent faith. It exists, the problem is that it's dead. It needs something to bring it to life and that something is works.

Is the faith there or is it non-existent? James' audience has the faith; it's there (2:1). But he wants to make sure they apply it, i.e., he wants to make sure they bring it to life by adding works, which is what he's been telling them from the beginning, "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (1:22). That this is what James means when he says "dead faith" is clear by how he ends his entire discussion on faith without works, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." (2:26).

James is not saying that his audience is missing a real faith; they have it. But like a human body without a spirit is useless—it's a corpse—so faith without works is a corpse also. Therefore, if James' audience fails to add good works to their faith, it will be lifeless, it will not save them from God's consequence for living in sin. Thus, good works are the spirit that brings faith (in God's Word) to life.

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**.*