

Epistle of Ya'akov (James) ~ 2:14-26

Faith Without Works Is Dead

Opponents of **Brit Hadashah** faith claim that it offers "cheap grace" - salvation by merely affirming in one's mind specific facts or ideas about **Yeshua**, or through merely feeling good in one's heart toward **God**, without doing good deeds. This passage is the classic disproof of that allegation.

The present passage expands upon the ideas we studied in my last post into the general principle that genuine faith proves itself by being expressed in good works. Therefore, mental or emotional **faith by itself** (v. 17) or **faith alone** (v. 24), **unaccompanied by** the right kinds of **actions, is dead** (vv. 17, 26), **barren** (v. 20), no better than the so-called "faith" demons have (v. 19) because they know the reality of the spirit world. But only **by actions** is **faith made complete** (v. 22) and capable of giving **God** ground to **declare** a person **righteous** (v. 24).

In this passage, the Greek word "faith" is **pistis**, usually rendered "trust" in the Jewish New Testament, as indicated in the last three posts. The word **faith** is used here because **Ya'akov** is speaking about not all of the trust, but just a part of it, the confessional, intellectual part. Ya'akov brings this out by using restrictive modifiers: **such faith** (v. 14), **faith by itself** (v. 17), **faith without actions** (v. 26; compare v. 20), and **faith alone** (v. 24); also, he points out specifically that actions must be added to this limited part of faith for faith to be **made complete** (v. 22).

Ya'akov and **Sha'ul** are in complete harmony; both understand genuine faith as an inward acknowledgment of **God's** truth which is expressed and flows outward in the form of good works. **Ya'akov's** point is that if good works are subtracted from genuine faith, what is left is barren and dead. **Sha'ul's** point is that if legalistic observances are added to or substituted for genuine faith, the results are barren and dead. Not in Romans, Ephesians, or anywhere else does **Sha'ul** demean the importance of good works in the life of faith.

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, 16 and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? 17 Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead. 18 But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!

But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. **Ya'akov** introduces an imaginary third party, **someone**, coming to defend an imaginary **you** who answers "**Yes**" to the questions of v. 14 and believes that intellectual faith without good works can save him: **someone will say that you** are the one who has genuine **faith and** that **I, Ya'akov, have** only **actions** without faith and am trying to save myself by my works (which would indeed contradict **Sha'ul** at Romans 3:28). My answer to **you** (and indirectly to **someone**) is: **Show me this faith of yours without the actions!** You won't be able to, since genuine faith is perceived not through talk but through the deeds that issue from it. However, for my part, **I, Ya'akov, will show you my faith by my actions**, and you will have to conclude that I am not trying to save myself by my works; instead, my works grow out of my faith and prove that it is genuine faith.

19 You believe that "God is one"? Good for you! The demons believe it, too - the thought makes them shudder with fear!

Do **you believe that "God is one"?** **Ya'akov's** challenge to his imaginary adversary is: "**You may affirm the Shema,**" the central creedal statement of **Judaism**, recited twice daily by every observant **Jew**. **Good for you!** - so what? **The demons believe it, too**, for **HaSatan** and his minions are thoroughly familiar with Scripture and do not dispute its truth (see Matthew 4:1-11). But such intellectual affirmation is not saving

faith, so *the thought makes them shudder with fear*. For unlike believers joyfully anticipating their eternal glorification with **God**, they know that an irreversible and dreadful fate in hell awaits them at **the Last Judgment** (Revelation 20). Also, unlike human skeptics, they know that this hell, with its lake of fire and brimstone, is absolute and not merely a scare tactic used to frighten the gullible.

²⁰ *But, foolish fellow, do you want to be shown that such "faith" apart from actions is barren?*

²¹ *Wasn't Avraham Avinu [our father] declared righteous because of actions when he offered up his son Yitz'chak on the altar?* ²² *You see that his faith worked with his actions; by the actions, the faith was made complete;* ²³ *and the passage of the Tanakh was fulfilled, which says, "Avraham had faith in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness." He was even called God's friend.*

It is not without significance that **Ya'akov**, in his argument that genuine faith must result in good works, employs the identical verse about **Avraham** (Genesis 15:6, quoted in v. 23) that **Sha'ul** uses at Romans 4:3 to prove the complete sufficiency of faith without legalistic observances.

God's friend ~ A friend, is not one who merely declares his loyalty but who proves it by his deeds. On the subject of friendship, **Yeshua** told his **talmidim**, *"No one has greater love than a person who lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you"* (Yochanan 15:13–14). **Avraham's** offering his son **Yitz'chak** resembles **God's** offering His son **Yeshua**.

²⁴ *You see that a person is declared righteous because of actions and not because of faith alone.*

²⁵ *Likewise, wasn't Rachav the prostitute also declared righteous because of actions when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another route?*

Rachav, the prostitute. See **Y'hoshua** 2:8–21, 6:25. She is also mentioned at **Messianic Jews** (Hebrews) 11:31 as one of the heroines of faith. Her example is even more striking than that of **Avraham**, for her works before her "conversion" were unarguably wicked. Her faith was genuine, for she not only affirmed the **God of Israel** (**Y'hoshua** 2:11) but did actions demonstrating her faith *when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another route*. This was the beginning of a complete change of lifestyle. **Mattityahu** 1:5 names her as an ancestor of **Yeshua the Messiah**.

²⁶ *Indeed, just as the body without a spirit is dead, so too faith without actions is dead.* ~ **Ya'akov** 2:14–26 (CJB)

We will learn more from **Ya'akov** as we dig into what he says about **Taming the Tongue**.