



More Than a Feeling

How Does Salvation Look Right Now?

It is funny about marriage. What was once so simple to picture and explain has become rather muddled in the past fifty years. How do you describe what a marriage is today...or at least what many think it is? When Mary Jo and I got married, it was clear that was the case. We did certain things that settled it. There were particular behaviors on our part that were what made a man and woman married. We gave each other wedding rings. We said vows before God to each other making a commitment to marriage. There were witnesses who made sure we really were getting married. After all that, Mary Jo and I signed a legal document that gave us the standing of being married according to the government. Marriage of course is much more than that! There are a million large and small behaviors that mark a marriage. It is of course a mental determination two people make that they are married but if that is all there is, then the marriage is no more than a fantasy, a dream of sorts. Marriage is physical and in many ways visual. You pretty much know it when you see it...at least you once did.

Faith in the salvation of Christ is likewise recognizable. James the brother of Jesus had this to say of it. **What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?** (James 2:14 NIV) The question James asks is rhetorical and the grammar in the original Greek in which it was first written gives his answer. "No!" Such faith he is insisting is worthless for salvation. That may sound heretical to other New Testament teaching if you don't give this some serious thought. Consider the famous statement of Paul. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.** (Ephesians 2: 8-9 NIV) When Paul talks about grace, he is of course speaking of the gift of God, the Lord's grace. It is spelled out in John 3: 16 how this grace came to be. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** (John 3: 16 NIV) Jesus died on the Cross to give us eternal life. It is a gift, completely undeserved and freely given. Paul adds, **But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** (Romans 5: 8 NIV)

We must clarify what salvation is. If salvation is to take place, it requires first and foremost the removal of your sins. You can't have eternal life if your sins are still there in you. Sin brings death. It is axiomatic. **For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 6: 23 NIV) Do you see the connection there between sin and eternal life? Death and sin go together, but God's gift is eternal life; in other words the removal of death, which is in effect, the removal of sin. John the Apostle points out the relationship between our sins and what Jesus did by dying on the Cross. **Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.** (1 John 3: 4-6 NIV) It is the taking away of sin that matters most in this gift God provides. And what is more, when salvation comes to us, eventually our sinning will cease. That is key to understanding the point James makes about faith and deeds. Take note in this rather long statement what the author of the book of Revelation says about our salvation. **Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.**

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.
(Revelation 1:4b-6 NIV)

The point of salvation is to get sin out of us, to make us rid of sin and the damage it causes us and others. A kingdom of priests is precisely what God had in store for us. Christ died to make us free to connect with God and build new lives with Him. Peter is brilliant in his concise explanation of what Jesus accomplished when Jesus died on the Cross. **He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.** (1 Peter 2: 24 NIV) A life after death is worthless if it is not also a life of rightness. Or as the Bible puts it, “righteousness”. Notice what John says is God’s purpose in bringing us salvation. **My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.** (1 John 2:1-2 NIV) In this life we may sin but that is not acceptable. God forgives our sin through Jesus’ death on the Cross and then we keep actively fighting sin in us so we may grow more and more good and right. Dying and going to heaven is not the end game of Christ in dying for us. It is making us perfect in every way that we might live forever as God’s good and holy people.

Let us now turn to what some see as a contradiction between what James says of salvation and what the rest of the New Testament does. Remember again what James declared about faith and salvation. **What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?** (James 2:14 NIV) Faith that does not have rightness worked in it is not the sort of faith saved people possess. Now ponder again what Paul said about faith and works. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.** (Ephesians 2: 8-9 NIV) The two are describing two separate concerns. Paul insists that salvation is completely the work of God, and it is a gift, something never earned and admittedly undeserved. It is grace. Now many wonder what sort of faith is required for salvation. How strong does it need to be? Salvation is not by works, not even the works of good or quality faith. It is a gift God gives us and it is through faith that we receive it. Let us put it another way. Grace is the means by which we gain salvation and faith in Christ as Savior is the road we take when we have it. Even Jesus said that those who have eternal life believe in Him as the one bringing them eternal life.

Let us now return to James’s statement. Those who gain salvation possess a certain type of faith. It is a faith that produces a changed life. He gives two examples to make the point. First James brings up Abraham and his willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Certain that God wanted him to kill Isaac and make him a burnt offering, Abraham proceeded to do just that. Here is the commentary of James. **Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.** (James 2: 21-22 NIV) So how would an outsider, perhaps even Abraham know he really had faith in God? He did something specific that proved his faith was real. James then reminds us of how Rahab, a non-Israelite prostitute helped two Israelite spies escape detection when they snuck into the city of Jericho just before Israel was set to destroy it. **In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?** (James 2: 25 NIV) In both cases, the faith of each came out when they did the right thing. They revealed the true nature of their faith by their actions.

There is a growing likeness to Jesus in all we do and say when we have faith in Christ for our salvation. It looks like something. We may still sin but in ever expanding ways, we make choices that are increasingly holy, loving and show our confidence in Christ as the one who will see us through what we face. Jesus pointed out the poor widow who took all the money she had and gave it to God as an offering. She loved God so much she trusted Him completely, even with her finances. May your faith look like that as you walk with God.