

## Chapter X

### THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM AND RAHAB

James has established the difference between the vain faith of the Jews, with their say-so and do-nothing philosophy, and the faith of a genuine believer, with his works in the work of God. Any definition of faith, other than a Biblical definition, will produce a lot of subjective opinions. Thus the writer of the book of Hebrews defined faith as *the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1).

This means Biblical faith is trusting in that which God has promised (believing He will perform His promises) without evidence beyond that which is declared in the Scriptures. Thus Paul wrote concerning Abraham's faith in the birth of Isaac:

(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. (Romans 4:17-21,

## The Faith of Abraham and Rahab

emphasis mine)

A Biblical faith, then, is one which *cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* (Romans 10:17). A Biblical faith is also *being fully persuaded that what God has promised, God is able also to perform*. Consequently a Biblical faith is simply trusting that the Lord will do what He has promised to do, knowing He cannot do otherwise. James illustrated the difference between a Biblical faith and a vain faith (when he wrote about faith and works) at this point in the narrative:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:21-26)

From this portion of the Word of God we learn that a Biblical faith calls for a response, or an action, in keeping with the promise of God. In other words, if God tells us to do something in order to receive something, we have not exercised faith if we fail to do what God told us to do. We can say we believe it, but there is no tangible evidence we have believed it without the action, or work, required by God's promise.

James said it this way, *Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?* The word translated *perfect* is a Greek word, *teleioo*. It means to execute fully; discharge; to reach the end of; run through; finish; to consummate; place in a condition of finality; to be brought to the goal; to reach the end of one's course; to be fully developed. (The Analytical Greek

Lexicon, pg. 401; Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506; Ninth Printing, 1973)

## The Faith of Abraham and Rahab

Thus a faith which is fully developed, or one which is brought to a condition of finality, is a faith which enters into the promises of God and actively puts to work the requirements surrounding His promises. For example, a person may say he believes a certain chair has the capacity to hold him up without collapsing. This same person may examine the chair for workmanship, design, construction techniques, material quality, and be thoroughly convinced the chair has the capacity to support his weight. However if he never commits his weight to the chair, he does not have an active faith in the capacity of the chair to support him.

He may affirm he has faith in the chair, but the commitment to prove his faith has never been made. His affirmation is akin to the Jews' say-so and do-nothing philosophy. Thus James contrasted a Biblical faith with the Jews' faith. A Biblical faith manifests itself with actions predicated upon the promises of God; whereas the Jews' faith, or philosophy, was illustrated by the man who told the hungry man, *Be warmed and be filled* and then provided nothing for him. In the Jewish way of thinking, the man fulfilled the royal law (thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself) when he said, *Be warmed and be filled*. But did he really love his neighbor as himself? Certainly not. In loving himself, he provided food and clothing for himself, but in *loving his neighbor*, he provided nothing but empty platitudes.

This brings us to the faith of Abraham and Rahab. These are the two people James chose to illustrate his point about faith and works. Anyone who understands anything about the lives of these two individuals should understand that James could not possibly be writing about moral works as a confirmation of faith. Such a position is simply untenable. Abraham certainly had character flaws when it comes to morality. On at least two occasions Abraham was willing to

## The Faith of Abraham and Rahab

jeopardize his wife's chastity in order to save his own neck. As for Rahab, it goes without saying, you cannot boast the morality of a woman who makes her living by prostitution. At the time the spies came to her, there is nothing in Scripture to indicate she was not practicing her trade: she is described as *Rahab the harlot*. Thus Abraham and Rahab prove James was not expressing the need for moral works as evidence of a genuine faith. James was illustrating the point we have already made: faith that requires an action, produces the action required.

Thus James showed his Jewish brethren that the works which are wrought as a manifestation of a viable faith are works that are predicated upon the sure promises of God. God had promised Abraham that of his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. When it looked as though this promise could not be fulfilled (when Abraham and Sarah were too old to produce a son), God promised: *I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life, and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son*. Then Isaac was born according to God's promise. Later, when Isaac came to be about thirty-three years of age, God said:

... Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (Genesis 22:2)

Therefore, based upon the promise of God (in Isaac all of the families of the earth shall be blessed), Abraham obeyed God. This was immediate. In the morning he saddled his ass with all of the things necessary for a burnt offering. He then took two servants, Isaac, and the ass, and traveled three days to the mount God showed him. At the base of the mount he transferred the burden from the ass to Isaac, and he told his servants: *Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you* (Genesis 22:5).

## The Faith of Abraham and Rahab

When they reached the top of the mount, in keeping with God's command, Abraham bound Isaac to the wood to offer him as a burnt offering. When he raised his knife to slay him, God stopped him and provided a ram to be offered in his stead. Abraham's actions, to this point, proved he believed if he put Isaac to death according to God's command, God would raise him to life again. Abraham's faith was also expressed to his servants when he said, *I and the lad ... will come again to you*. Much later, in the New Testament, the Spirit of God testified to Abraham's faith through the writer to the Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac; and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure. (Hebrews 11:17-19, emphasis mine)

Many have marveled at Abraham's faith. Yet the truth is, everyone who has trusted the gospel -- that *Jesus Christ died for their sins according to the Scriptures* -- has exercised the same sort of faith. We have put our eternal security into God's hands (according to God's promise) the same as Isaac was put into God's hands (also according to His promise).

Rahab's faith was of the same sort. When the spies came to her she gladly received them, because she had observed God's dealings with Israel from the time they had left Egypt. Rahab had concluded the God of the Jews was the true and living God. This prompted her to receive the spies when they came to Jericho. It also prompted her to put her own life at risk to the local authorities when she hid the spies on the roof and told the authorities that the spies had been there, but they had left before the gate was closed. She told them she presumed they had gone towards the fords of Jordan. After the authorities left in search of the spies, the spies promised Rahab she would be preserved when Jericho was destroyed. All she had to do was hang the same scarlet cord

## The Faith of Abraham and Rahab

(with which the spies would gain their freedom) out of the window when the armies of Israel would encircle the city to destroy it.

Since the two spies were the agents of God, they spoke with the authority of God. Thus when Rahab put the red cord out of the window as the armies of Israel approached the city of Jericho, this was evidence of her faith in the promise of God and the faith of those with her in the room. It mattered not that the promise was conveyed by the spies. They were to Rahab as those who preach the gospel in this age: they spoke by the authority of God. Remember our Lord said, *All [authority] is given unto me in heaven and in earth, Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen* (Matthew 28:19-20, emphasis mine).

James used the positive actions of Abraham and Rahab to illustrate that a genuine faith is not passive but active. Then he said, *For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also* (James 2:26). This is just another way of saying what has already been said. Here the promise of God is likened to the body. The active faith of the individual in the promise of God is likened to the spirit, which gives the body life. One cannot work without the other. If no one, from Adam to the end of the age, ever believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, then the promise of eternal life to whomever believes would lie as a corpse. To put it another way, all of the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were of none effect to those Jews (to whom James wrote) if they failed to enter into the reality of the promises by faith in Jesus Christ. Thus it would be as though the promises of God had never been made.