

## A FAITH THAT WORKS

### JAMES 2 v 25

**It was the same with the prostitute Rahab. She was put right with God through her actions, by welcoming the Israelite spies and helping them to escape by a different road.**

One of the characteristics of the book of James that we have noted is how practical it is. This has led to much controversy surrounding the book. Martin Luther, the great Reformer, formed the view that James was contradicting the teaching of Paul. In his letters Paul emphasises 'justification by faith in Christ alone' while James emphasises the importance of works; James 2 v 14, 24 & 26. Perhaps it is not so much that there is a contradiction between two contrasting views, but rather that James adds something to what Paul is teaching. In our evangelical heritage we are taught that we do not become Christians by our good works. We become Christians by faith in Christ alone. Now James is telling us that faith in Christ alone is not enough; we need to add works to demonstrate that we are genuine Christians. So who is right? Is this a serious contradiction which leaves us confused about the Christian faith? J I Packer wrote; **"James' whole letter shows him agreeing with Paul that faith must change one's life...The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone. It produces moral fruit; it expresses itself 'through love' (Galatians 5 v 6)".**

James is not diluting the importance of faith, but he is clearly saying that unless faith is substantiated by works then it has little or no value. He is advocating a faith that works. To illustrate his point James introduces two famous characters in Old Testament scripture, Abraham and Rahab, both of whom were examples of faith. You couldn't find two more different people if you tried. It's understandable why James chose Abraham. He had believed that God would do what he promised, and he was prepared to put that faith into action. But Rahab was an unlikely example of faith. Let's think about her; v 25. Rahab was a pagan prostitute. She lived in the city of Jericho at the time when the Israelites, on their way to the Promised Land, were about to cross the river Jordan with Jericho as their first target. In the story Joshua sent two men ahead of his invasion to spy out the city. They stayed the night in Rahab's house and enjoyed her generous hospitality. She protected them from the troops who were looking for them, explaining that she had come to believe in Israel's God as the only true God in heaven and earth. The point James is making is that Rahab translated that belief into action, even though in her situation it was risky to do so. In return, Joshua spared her and her family when the invasion took place. Later on Rahab seems to have married an Israelite and remarkably became the great-great-grandmother of king David and hence part of the family tree of Jesus himself. Tom Wright wrote; **"Translating belief into action, even when it seems impossible or downright dangerous. That is the faith that matters. That is the faith that justifies. That is the faith that saves. This is near the heart of the message of James: the challenge to make sure that faith is the real thing, that it does what it says on the packet".**

There is a challenge here for us. It's one thing to have a Christian faith. But Christian belief, which is the basis of faith, is only genuine if it translated into action. It's not enough to have faith; we need to have a

faith that works. This is the kind of lifestyle that cuts through and makes an impact. Anything less is a sham and serves no useful purpose. People will only take us seriously when they see a Christian faith that works. Our lives must make a difference in the community where we live.

Perhaps you might wonder what relevance this study has in the context of the Communion service. There is an important detail in the Rahab story that is hidden in the brief reference James makes to her, though it is implied in it. The story tells us that the men of Israel promised Rahab life and safety, both for her and her father's house, if she would bind a scarlet cord in her window; Joshua 2 v 18. This she faithfully did and, when Jericho was delivered into the hands of Joshua by the mighty intervention of God, Rahab and her family were spared because of that scarlet cord.

We can trace the scarlet cord throughout scripture. In his early ministry Jesus began to tell his disciples that he would suffer and die; he was foreshadowing his death on the cross. At the last supper Jesus said; "This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me". And in the same way he took the cup after they had eaten, saying; "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood". When we think about the cross, we think about the shed blood of Christ. The sacrifice of Christ consummated the great redemptive plan and purpose of God in the world. This is 'The Scarlet Cord of Redemption'.

The Communion service reminds us of what the cord symbolises. But the scarlet cord which hung from Rahab's window was also a demonstration of her faith in action. James says; "*for what she did*". A Communion service is not an end in itself. Sure it is the place where we can renew our faith or even find faith for the first time, but when we rise from the Communion table we must go back into the world to demonstrate a faith that works.

\* This talk was given at a Communion service.