

Faith “Alone?”

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All who truly believe the Bible believe that salvation is *by faith*. Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, *having been justified by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Most Bible students agree that this verse contains the theme of the book of Romans – *justification by faith*. Sadly, many people make the mistake of thinking of faith *alone* when they think of justification “by faith.” Please notice, however, that the passage affirms justification by faith: It does not affirm the concept of justification by faith *only*! There is a huge difference between the two doctrines. Justification by faith means justification by all of the things that faith includes. Whereas, faith “alone” involves only a mental assent of *faith*, and excludes everything else that is required by God.

Advocates of the faith only doctrine often attempt to defend themselves by accusing their opponents of believing in justification by “works.” Many intend to leave the impression that their opponents believe in salvation by works “only,” which is simply not true. Some religionists do believe in the concept of salvation by meritorious works, but their concept is entirely unbiblical and it has not the agreement or support of Bible believers. Let us avoid the prejudicial and unproductive rhetoric of those who are dishonest, and let us seek to understand the Truth on this important topic.

Is Salvation By Anything ALONE?

Would it be right to say that salvation is by “grace alone?” No, such would not be accurate. Salvation is “by grace” (Eph. 2:8), but not by grace *alone*. It must be seen that if salvation were wholly and exclusively by grace, that is, by grace “alone,” then it could not possibly be also “by faith,” and certainly not by faith “alone!” Ephesians 2:8 says:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”

Notice that salvation is not attributed to either *grace* or *faith alone*. Ephesians 2:8 harmonizes with itself only if salvation is attributed to both *grace* and *faith*, and to neither “alone.” Peter stated that we are saved by baptism (1 Peter 3:21). Did he mean baptism *alone*? No, he meant by baptism along with everything else involved in salvation, both man’s part and God’s. The Bible attributes salvation to several different things, but it never attributes salvation to one item *alone*. We are saved by *hope* (Rom. 8:24), but not by hope *alone*. We are saved by *belief and baptism* (Mark 16:16), but not by belief and baptism *alone*. We are saved by *repentance and baptism* (Acts 2:38), but not by repentance and baptism *alone*. We are saved by *confession by mouth* (Rom. 10:10), but not by confession *alone*. We are saved by faithful living (Matt. 10:22), but not by faithful

living *alone*. There are other things that could be cited (see the list in Romans 5:6-11), but these suffice to make the point. Salvation is by nothing “*alone*.”

Not All Who Believe Will Be Saved

As shocking and unbelievable as this may sound to some people, the Bible actually teaches that *some* believers will not be saved. Consider John’s words from John 12:42, 43:

42: Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue:

43: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Though they “*believed on*” (Jesus), yet they met with God’s disapproval. Why was this? It was because they “*did not confess Him*.” Their desire to please men was greater than their desire to please God. They feared men more than they feared God. They believed, but refused to confess. The fact that they were rejected by God proves that faith alone does not save people from their sins. More is required. One must do everything that God requires in order to please Him. We may not merely choose the thing that least offends others and that most conveniences us. We must fear God and work righteousness in order to be accepted by God (Acts 10:34, 35).

James wrote,

19: You believe that there is one God; you do well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

20: But will you know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” (James 2:19, 20).

James’ argument is that if men are saved by faith *alone*, then the devils will also make it to Heaven, for they *believe* in God as much as any man, provided that one defines “*belief*” as belief *alone*! Of course, we know that these *believing* devils will actually be cast into Hell (Rev. 19:20; 20:10). So, what do we make of the fact that they believe? The answer is obvious, especially in the context of James chapter two: the devils have faith *alone*. They have, therefore, a *dead* faith which cannot please God or save the soul. James 2:19 proves that salvation is not by faith alone.

I find it particularly interesting that James described the devils as both believing and *trembling*. It should be noted that, even though their faith will not save them, the devils have a faith that causes them to *tremble* at the mere thought of God’s existence and power. I fear that many advocates of the faith-alone doctrine do not fully appreciate the implications of James 2:19. The devils have far more than a mere acceptance of God’s existence: they have faith in God’s omniscience and omnipotence, His eternal attributes. My point is that even *this kind of faith* will not save! Obedience to God’s commands is essential, as is indicated in the very next verse.

“Faith” Defined

Many faith-alone advocates hold their position due to a misunderstanding of the meaning of faith. The faith that is held by many is inactive. It is confined to man’s thoughts and measured by his feelings. However, Bible faith is active and obedient. Let us consider some samples of genuine faith. These examples are given by the Holy Spirit, and are provided to illustrate the nature of real, God-approved faith. I refer to Hebrews chapter 11, which lists several men and women who lived by faith. In describing the actions and conduct of various people of God, the Holy Spirit described them by the words “By faith...” It is well worth considering that these familiar words are often followed by some action that was taken, or activity that was performed by the person being commended for his *faith*.

By faith Abel offered a sacrifice (Heb. 11:4)

By faith Noah prepared an ark (Heb. 11:7)

By faith Abraham obeyed (Heb. 11:8)

By faith Abraham offered up Isaac (Heb. 11:17)

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed (marched) about seven days (Heb. 11:30)

Several more examples could be cited from this chapter, but these suffice to make the point. People were commended for their faith when they were commended for what they **did by faith!** True faith involves action and obedience.

Harmony of Faith and Works

Many people have difficulty harmonizing faith and works. The Holy Spirit had no such difficulty. The inspired writer, James, cited two examples of justification *by works*: Abraham (James 2:21) and Rahab (James 2:25). Please consider the actual verses:

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? (Jas. 2:21).

“Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?” (Jas. 2:25).

With these plain statements in mind, consider that the Hebrew writer attributed their justification to *faith* (Heb. 11:8-19, 31). Harmony between Hebrews and James is only found when we dismiss the false notions of men and their creeds, and focus exclusively upon the teaching of the Scriptures. Harmony is seen when we combine the *faith* with the *works*, which is exactly what Hebrews and James do. To really appreciate this harmony let us consider the entire context of James 2:20-26:

20: But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

21: Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

22: Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

23: 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.

24: Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

25: Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?

26: For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Interestingly, James 2:24 is the only place in the Bible where the words “faith” and “only” are used together and in that order, and James here affirms that salvation is “**not by faith only**”! Salvation is the result of a combination of *faith and works*. Faith without works is *dead*. Dead faith is an empty, meaningless, worthless faith. Such faith “avails” nothing. To the saints of Galatia, Paul wrote, “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love*” (Galatians 5:6). Paul’s statement seams together three great Bible doctrines – *faith, works and love*, and attributes salvation to a combination of them all, and to neither by itself.

Abraham and Rahab were justified by *faith AND works*, not by either one of them **alone**.

Obedience Is Necessary

Many people do not realize that Jesus is “*the author of eternal salvation to all of those who obey him*” (Hebrews 5:9). Jesus is nowhere said to be the Savior of those who practice faith *alone*. We must see that faith and obedience are perfectly compatible. Faith is essential to salvation, and no one can please God without it (Heb. 11:6), but the Bible often promises salvation to the *obedient*. Jesus defined His true family members as those who obey him. He said, “*For whosoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother*” (Mk. 3:35). In the “sermon on the mount,” Jesus described the character of a true child of God. He closed the sermon by emphasizing the absolute necessity of gospel obedience (Matthew 7:21-27). He said,

“*Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven*” (Matthew 7:21).

These words of Jesus utterly devastate the concept of salvation by faith alone. Matthew 7:21 contains a clear denunciation of the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, as well as a clear affirmation of the doctrine of salvation by **obedient faith**. In making His point about the futility of faith alone (a mere verbal acceptance), Jesus does not *condemn* the practice of verbal acknowledgement of

His Lordship, for this is elsewhere required by Scripture (Rom. 10:10). But, He does teach that this practice **alone** will not result in salvation. The believer must also *do the will of the Father* in order to enter Heaven. Jesus used a simple illustration to describe the wisdom of obedience and the foolishness of disobedience. He said,

24: Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

25: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

26: And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

27: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it (Matthew 7:24-27).

The wise man hears and does, but the foolish man hears and does not. The difference in these two men is as great as the difference between heaven and hell. Those who refuse to do the will of God will be lost. God's wrath is being presently stored up against those who *do not obey the truth* (Rom. 2:8). Jesus will one day take vengeance upon those *who know not God and who obey not the gospel of Christ* (2 Thess. 1:8).

Conclusion

Faith *alone* cannot save. John 3:16 does teach that those who believe on Jesus will be saved, but it does not teach that those who have *belief alone* will be saved. There, faith is used in its absolute sense. John 3:36 teaches the same thing as John 3:16, but verse 36 uses a Greek word for "believe" which means to "obey." Thus, Jesus teaches that people will be saved by obedient faith. We have seen that people will not be saved by faith that won't *confess* (John 12:42), or faith that won't *obey* (James 2:19, 20). Let us accept that faith apart from God's other requirements of salvation cannot save.

Upon hearing the words of that first gospel sermon, many on the day of Pentecost said, "*Men and brethren, what shall we do?*" Peter told them what to do. He said, "*Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost*" (Acts 2:37, 38). Thousands obeyed then (Acts 2:41), and men and women continue to do the same thing today. Will you consider doing so? Please contact us if you are interested in further study.

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