



THE COMPLETING OF OUR FAITH – James 2:20-26; Genesis 15:1-6 **Becky Douglass (26/06/2022)**

Last week we looked at the first part of James' explanation of why both faith AND works are necessary in the Christian life. It was mainly a theological explanation, pointing out the difference between a mental belief in certain facts versus a faith that transforms one's life. His deep pastoral concern for these people was that they experience the rich relationship with God possible through faith in Christ Jesus. Negatively, this means that they need to understand the foolishness of thinking that they could ever enjoy life with God without it affecting their behaviour. Positively, this opens them up to discovering a new way to live – enjoying fellowship with Him and being channels of His love and grace to those around them.

He starts off this week by saying:

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? (v. 20)

James will now turn from talking about theology and focus on two examples from Jewish history – two stories of faith. As we mentioned earlier, the majority of those to whom James was writing had been forced to flee Jerusalem and Israel. They were displaced Jews and their Jewish heritage would have been very precious to them. James now appeals to the stories of two Jewish heroes – Abraham and Rahab. Two more different people couldn't be imagined, and by referring to these two people, James wants them to see that these ideas apply to everyone – even them – and even us!

Two stories of faith

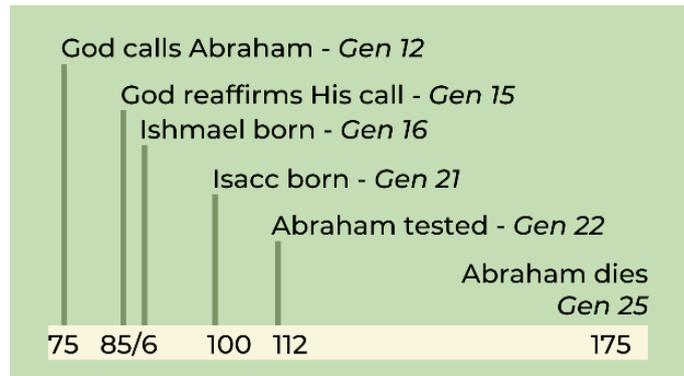
- **Abraham**

Abraham was the Founding Father of Judaism – the very first Jew. Every natural-born Jew can trace their lineage back to him. Within the society of the day, he was also the top of the social ladder – male, wealthy, and a leader. However, becoming the man God intended was a process which took time and had many ups and downs along the way.

When he was 75 years old, God called Abraham into a relationship with Him and promised to make a great nation from his descendants. We don't know what Abraham knew about God before this. What we do know is that he responded positively to God, left Haran where he was living and moved his family to Canaan. About 10 years later, God reaffirms this call and the Bible says that, "Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith." (Gen 15:6). Notice that at this point, Abraham hasn't done very much to demonstrate the faith he has in God. In fact, just a few months after this encounter, Abraham takes matters into his own hands and Ishmael is

born through Sarah's servant, Hagar. But God says that Ismael is not the chosen heir and Abraham has to wait some more.

About 15 years pass. During this time, Abraham gets himself into various troubles and through them learns more about God. He is getting a few rough edges knocked off! Then God returns to remind Abraham of the promised son and finally, when Abraham and Sarah are about 100 years old, Isaac is born. Celebrations abound!! Now Abraham can relax with a secure heir and future – or so he thinks.



When Isaac is about 12 years old God appears to Abraham again. God knew what was in Abraham's heart and how he had grown in his faith and godliness over the years, but God wanted to give Abraham an opportunity to put all he had learnt into practice. He asks Abraham to give up his son, Isaac, and sacrifice him to God. What was Abraham going to do? Would he try to find a way around God's words as he had done when he had Ishmael? Or would he trust that God had a plan, even though it looked hopeless?

Abraham chose to trust God completely. The book of Hebrews tells us that he believed that God could even bring Isaac back to life again if necessary. When Abraham shows his faith by his actions, God says, "Now I know that you truly fear God" (Genesis 22:12) and He steps in and provides another sacrifice so that Isaac is not killed. God has given Abraham an opportunity to show the depth of his faith. As James says:

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? (v. 21)

The idea behind "considered righteous" is that of being shown or declared to be righteous. It can also be translated as being "justified". When Paul uses the term, he usually means something more equivalent to Abraham being "*counted as righteous*" when he originally believed God. Here, James is talking about declaring his faith through his actions.

James goes on to say:

You see that his faith and his actions were working together ... (v. 22)

Earlier, James has talked about the uselessness of faith which has been separated from actions. Here he talks about faith and actions working together – not one instead of the other but both together. The word used is the one from which we get our English word "synergy". Synergy refers to what happens when two things are combined to form something new that is more than just the sum of the original parts. When faith and actions work together in synergy, something greater is created – something richer and deeper than mere mental belief with good deeds tacked on. Our faith becomes a living thing inhabited by God and through which God can do great things.

James completes his thought by saying:

... and his faith was made complete by what he did. (v. 22)

Abraham's faith has been "perfected" or "matured" as a result of putting his faith into practice. His faith in Genesis 15 was real, but it was not all that it could be. As he worked out his faith in each situation he faced, his faith grew and developed more meaning. By the time he had gotten to Genesis 22, it was a mature faith.

I find it helpful to think of a diamond. When you take a diamond from the ground it is a diamond, but it doesn't look like much. You can see that it is something special, and it is worth plenty, but it does not show off its true beauty. To bring out the true beauty and value of a diamond takes great skill and patience. The gem cutter looks at the raw diamond and discovers its strengths and faults and carefully cuts and polishes it into the best shape to show off its glory. In the same way, our initial faith in Christ's death and resurrection is "saving faith", but it is not all that God desires for us. He will use things in our lives to "cut and polish" our faith so that it can show its true beauty and better reflect the glory of His character. As we put our faith into practice, our faith is "perfected" or "completed".

When Abraham was willing to give up his son, trusting that God could do something to put things right again, James tells us that:

... the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. (v. 23)

God's pronouncement in Genesis 15 was "proved to be true" in Genesis 22. Then others could see that Abraham really did trust God and Abraham's confidence in God was made sure. By this time, his faith was no longer just "belief", it was a deep, trusting friendship, built over many years.

- **Rahab**

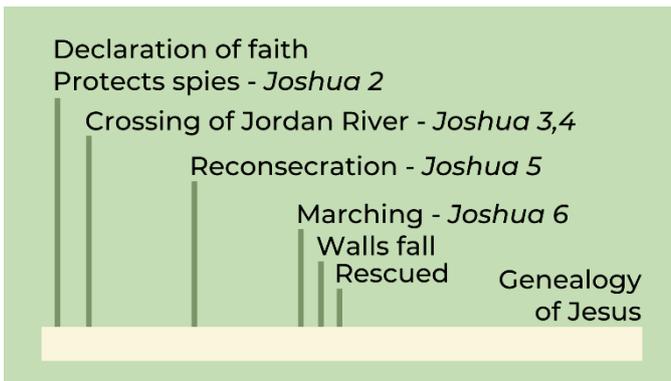
James now moves on to talk about someone who couldn't be more unlike Abraham. Rahab was a Gentile, a Canaanite, an enemy of the Jews. On top of that, she was a woman and a prostitute. Often women were sold into prostitution to pay debts – she would have been poor. While Abraham was respected and powerful, Rahab was powerless and scorned. I think James chooses to talk about Rahab because many of his readers might have thought they could never live up to the standard set by Abraham. However, it isn't so easy to say that Rahab's faith is beyond us.

Her story starts with the Jews camped just on the other side of the Jordan River, waiting to move into the land promised to them by God. Joshua sends a couple of spies into Jericho who discover that everyone is afraid of what the Jews are going to do. They stay at an inn, run by Rahab, situated in the wall of the city. Somehow, word gets to the officials of their presence. They come knocking, looking to capture the spies. What is Rahab going to do?

Rahab chooses to hide the spies and send the soldiers looking elsewhere for them. Then she goes to the spies with this confession:

"I know the LORD has given you this land ... For the LORD your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below" (Joshua 2:9,11)

Other people were afraid of the Jews, but Rahab chooses to turn that fear into faith in the God of the Jews. She then puts that belief to work as she helps the spies escape. But before they go, she makes them promise that they will save her when they take the city. If I had been Rahab, I think I would have wanted to leave with the spies! Instead, she agrees to wait in the city and must trust that the God she has confessed and the people with whom she has aligned herself can be trusted.



But she is going to have to wait for a while to see the outcome. Soon after the spies return to the Jewish camp, God miraculously parts the waters of the Jordan River, and they cross over and camp near Jericho. Then we have a period of a couple of months during which the Jews re-consecrate themselves to God. Any uncircumcised male is circumcised and the whole camp celebrates the Passover Feast for the first time in many years.

I wonder how Rahab felt as she watched and waited? Did her faith falter? Was she afraid? When others speculated on what was going to happen, did she say anything? She had plenty of time to change her mind if she wanted to. But she stayed strong in her faith and waited for her salvation.

Then one day, the Jews came out of their tents and walked around the wall of Jericho - and they did it every day for a whole week. Rahab would have had a prime viewing spot from her house in the wall. The rising tension must have been almost unbearable. According to the plan, Rahab hung the red cord out of her window and waited. And then on the seventh day, the priests blew their trumpets and the Jews shouted in victory, and the walls started to crumble. Finally, when all the rest of the wall had fallen, the men who had come to her as spies, now came to her as rescuers and Rahab was saved. She not only didn't die with the rest of the Canaanites, but she became a part of the God's people. In fact, she was integrated into the very line of David and eventually the lineage of Jesus himself. What a turnaround for a Gentile prostitute!

Our story of faith

As you hear the stories of both Abraham and Rahab, you may be tempted to dismiss them as unrealistic for an ordinary person like yourself. And yet, I think both Abraham and Rahab were ordinary people when God first gave them an opportunity to have faith in Him. The thing that set them apart was not that they were extraordinary people but that they were willing to give God a chance to work in their lives. They decided to have faith in Him and then opened themselves up to what He wanted to do in their lives. They put their faith into action by the power of God. As we saw with Abraham, they didn't always get it right! But God was faithful to them, and He enabled them to stay faithful to Him.

As we think about how we respond to James' message, there are a couple of things we can take away for our own relationship with God.

- **A Reminder: The character of our God**

Firstly, I think it helps us to remember the character of our God. Some gods (little g!) which others worship, I would never trust. They come and go and they are limited in what they can do. But as we remind ourselves regularly on Sundays, our God is eternal and all-sufficient. He never changes and there is nothing He cannot do. This gives me confidence that if I trust Him with my life, He is able to take care of me.

This morning, our worship focus was:

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. (Psalm 89:1)

We can trust that God wants the very best for us and He proved this by sending His Son to save us. And as Abraham demonstrated, He doesn't give up on us when we do the wrong thing. He expects us to sin, and he is not shocked or deterred when we do. This is because our God is perfectly just

and merciful. He doesn't cover-up our sins, but He does forgive us. He picks us up, dusts us off, sets us back on the right path, and shows us the right way to go.

- **A Challenge: The completion of our faith**

God's love forgives us, but it also wants the very best for us. He is not content to leave us as diamonds in the rough. He has a vision for us which is so much bigger than we can imagine. This is the vision which Paul had for the people with whom he ministered.

He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. (Colossians 1:28,29)

He knew they had faith in God, but he wanted to see their belief put into action; to see their faith matured.

This is our challenge: are we willing to unreservedly trust God and surrender ourselves to His will? In previous verses in James, the "deeds" he has been talking about have focused on the need to show love to others, to be Christ-like in our actions. This is an important part of re-aligning our lives to God's will. However, in both Abraham's and Rahab's life, we see another kind of action required. For them, putting their faith into action required that they trusted God for their very lives. They had to put their faith into action by trusting Him completely to do what He said He would do even when it looked impossible. There is a time in the lives of all God's children when we will need to step out in faith, leave the security of our well-ordered lives and walk with Him even though we can not see where it will take us. Are we open to this? Will we allow God to cut and polish our faith so that it can shine in all its glory?

- **A Hope: The presence of God**

I know I could never do this were it not for the promise we have that anywhere God leads us, He has promised that He will walk with us. We are never forsaken. And even though we stumble and fall – as Abraham did many times! – He will never forsake us. His arms are always open to receive us. He will forgive us and give us the strength to move forward with Him.

Sometimes the way he calls us to walk is not easy. But His presence gives us a place of rest. Jesus said,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

The walk of faith is not always easy, but it is possible because Jesus has promised to yoke himself to us and share the load with us. And He knows our hearts and what we are ready to face. He did not ask Abraham to take a big step of faith at the beginning of his walk with God. He grew his faith step by step and when he was asked to put his faith into action in a big way, he was ready for it. God's desire was not to cause Abraham's faith to fail, but for it to shine. And the same is true for each one of us today. He wants us to shine like an expertly cut and polished diamond – reflecting God's light in every one of our unique facets.