

# Faith vs. Works in James: Resolving the Problem

## Introduction

The epistle of James has created much confusion in Christendom throughout Church history. The primary source of confusion has been James' view of faith and works. Luther, for example, in his *Preface to the New Testament*, wrote:

*Therefore St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it. But more of this in other prefaces.*

He elaborated in his *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* that he did not consider it the work of an apostle. Luther explained his reasons:

*First: Flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works, and says that Abraham was justified by his works, in that he offered his son Isaac, though St. Paul, on the contrary, teaches, in Romans 4:2, that Abraham was justified without works, by faith alone, before he offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15:6. ...*

*Second: Its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times, but he teaches nothing about Him, and only speaks of common faith in God. ...*

*But this James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works; and he mixes the two up in such disorderly fashion that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took some sayings of the apostles' disciples and threw*

*them thus on paper; or perhaps they were written down by someone else from his preaching. He calls the law a "law of liberty," though St. Paul calls it a law of slavery, (of wrath, of death and of sin, Galatians 3:23; Romans 7:11).*

Luther's understanding of James was mostly correct. James does contradict Paul's doctrine of *sola fide*. But Luther was wrong that the letter was an "epistle of straw." James is the Word of God, a valid, canonical book. The reason for Luther's negative view of James was because he did not understand *why* James wrote what he wrote. This study will reveal why James wrote what he did and resolve the problem of faith and works.

### **Who Was James?**

The author of James was James the Just, a half-brother of Jesus (Galatians 1.19), not the Apostle James, the son of Zebedee, who was one of the twelve apostles. The Apostle James had been martyred in 44 A.D. by Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great (Acts 12.1-2). Perhaps, following his death, James replaced the Apostle and assumed his place of prominence. In any case, James was not one of the original Twelve and was, therefore, a second-order apostle. By the time of Acts 15, however, he had superseded Peter at Jerusalem for it was he, not Peter, who was in charge of the Council of Jerusalem in 51 A.D. At that Council, the Jerusalem apostles met with Paul to address the problem of Gentile salvation under Paul's ministry.

Like the Twelve, James was a Jew, who had been saved by believing the "gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 4.23, 9.35) that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (Matthew 16.15-17; John 11.27). James had not believed in Christ while Jesus was alive (John 7.2-5). He came to salvation after the Lord's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15.7).

### **Dating James**

Based on internal evidence, James was written early, probably around 45-50 A.D., and is the earliest of the New Testament letters. It is certain James was written before 51 A.D. for his letter indicates no understanding of Paul's gospel or Paul's other doctrines. This fact is confirmed by Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

### **James Wrote To Jews**

Despite what most of Christendom believes and teaches, the Twelve never had a ministry to Gentiles. They ministered to Jews only. At the end of the Jerusalem Council, the participants formally agreed to continue to abide by this state of affairs: the Jerusalem Jews and those under their leadership would minister to Jews and Paul would minister to Gentiles (Galatians 2.7-9). This truth is revealed by the introductory address of James' letter:

*James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings (James 1.1).*

A couple of things are noteworthy from James' statement. The first is that James wrote to Jews, not Gentiles. The second is that all twelve tribes were addressed, therefore, known. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, addressed all Israel, not one or two tribes (Acts 2.36). Peter, like James, wrote to Jews, not Gentiles (1 Peter 1.1). God prophetically promised all twelve tribes will remain forever (Ezekiel 37.15-23). None of the twelve tribes have been "lost." They were known in the first century and will be known in the future (Revelation 7.4-8). These verses should dispel any "lost ten tribes" nonsense that makes it way around the theological circuit from time to time. Members of the twelve tribes to whom James wrote were dispersed ([δίασπορά](#)) due to attacks from Gentile powers. Some went abroad as a result of the Assyrian (circa 740 B.C.) and Babylonian (circa 600 B.C.) captivities.

Many whom James (and Peter) wrote were Jews forced to flee Israel due to persecution (cf. Acts 8.1). Jews still resided in Babylon and Peter wrote sent greetings from some special woman who lived there (1 Peter 5.13).

### **James on Faith and Works**

The great mistake most make on the matter of faith and works is to try and reconcile James' statements with Paul's. Consider the below statements, the first by Paul, and the second by James.

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law (Romans 3.28).
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You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2.24).
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These two statements are opposed. Reconciling or harmonizing them cannot be done without considerable twisting of the Scriptures. That is the approach found in most commentaries, articles, and sermons. For most religious professionals, theology is dearer than Scripture, and they refuse to allow the text to stand as written. These two statements *cannot* be reconciled. But *both* are true. How is this possible?

### **Salvation in the Old Testament**

No clear statement or definition of the gospel or of salvation exists in the Old Testament. Compared to Paul's straightforward statements about salvation, salvation in the Old Testament is murky. What is revealed in the Old Testament is that salvation involved faith and works. The letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the faith of Old Testament saints (Hebrews 11). Thus, Old Testament believers were saved by faith. But works were also involved in salvation. Salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*) was unknown to the Jews.

### **Salvation and the Levitical Sacrifices**

Hebrews reveals that the Old Testament Levitical sacrifices were typical and temporary. Animal sacrifices provided a temporary propitiation (satisfaction) (□□□□□□) of sin and were pictures or shadows, as it were, of the future, effective sacrifice for sin by the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10.4). For Israel, animal sacrifices “covered” or “covered up” sin. For us, looking back, they reveal how God was laying the groundwork of a greater reality than animal sacrifices. This was the shed blood of the Messiah Himself to remove sin.

The Jews of the Old Testament had no idea the animal sacrifices they offered pointed to the greater reality of the death of the Messiah who would solve the problem of sin and death. For them, the animal sacrifices were the reality. What they knew was God had commanded them to perform them and that the sacrifices involved the shedding of blood to deal with sin. Leviticus contains the following instructions regarding the burnt offering:

*<sup>1</sup> Then the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd or the flock. <sup>3</sup> If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord (Leviticus 1.1-3).*

When a Jew sinned, he was to bring an unblemished animal to the priest for a sacrifice to make himself right with God. The text gives the process:

*<sup>4</sup> He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf. <sup>5</sup> He shall slay the young bull before the Lord; and Aaron’s sons the priests shall offer up the blood*

*and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting. <sup>6</sup> He shall then skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces (Leviticus 1.4-6).*

The sinner would place his hand upon the animal's head to indicate his identification with the animal and kill it. The priest would take the blood and sprinkle it on the brazen altar. The animal was then skinned and cut up. The rest of the passage, vv. 7-14, describes the specifics of the burning of the animal, washing its legs and entrails, and sprinkling its blood on the altar. This process spoke of the removal, i.e., "covering" of sin and cleansing.

The Mosaic Law required animal sacrifices for sin. Bringing an animal to a priest was a *work*. But effective covering of sin for the sinner required faith. From the divine perspective, the sacrifice was effective for it fulfilled the Law, and therefore, God's justice. But for the individual, it was effective if he believed it.<sup>1</sup> So, forgiveness required a work (bringing an animal sacrifice) and faith (believing the sacrifice covered the sin).

### **Salvation in the Gospels**

Consider the following account in the Gospel of Mark (cf. Matthew 19.16-26; Luke 18.18-30):

*As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? (Mark 10.17)*

The man's question was straightforward: "How do I obtain eternal life?" What was the Lord's answer? Did He tell the man to believe He would die for his sins and rise from the dead? The next verses declare:

<sup>18</sup> *And Jesus said to him, Why do you call Me good? No one is*

good except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments, Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother (Mark 10.18-19).

The man responded:

*And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up" (Mark 10.20).*

The conversation concluded in the following manner:

<sup>21</sup> Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me. <sup>22</sup> But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. <sup>23</sup> And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>24</sup> The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. <sup>26</sup> They were even more astonished and said to Him, Then who can be saved? <sup>27</sup> Looking at them, Jesus said, With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.

Jesus' response to the man was that to acquire eternal life required keeping the commandments (Matthew 19.17). In other words, works. When the man responded he had kept the commandments, Jesus told him to do another work: sell his possessions and give them to the poor. Did Jesus teach salvation by works? Indeed He did.

Consider the following well-known passage:

*<sup>9</sup> After this manner therefore pray: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come, Your will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. <sup>14</sup> For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: <sup>15</sup> But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6.9-15).*

Jesus told His disciples that unless they forgave others, God would not forgive them. Forgiveness is a work. Consider how different Paul wrote about the matter of forgiving others:

*And be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you (Ephesians 4.32).*

See the difference? According to Jesus, according to God's program to Israel under the gospel of the kingdom, God's forgiveness depended one on another forgiving another. But under God's program to the Church, the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24) believers are to forgive because God *has* forgiven them. The difference is between night and day. Again, works were required for salvation.

Now, consider the following passage:

*<sup>17</sup> One day He was teaching; and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform*



healing. <sup>18</sup> And some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed; and they were trying to bring him in and to set him down in front of Him. <sup>19</sup> But not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, into the middle of the crowd, in front of Jesus. <sup>20</sup> Seeing their faith, He said, Friend, your sins are forgiven you.” <sup>21</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone? <sup>22</sup> But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, Why are you reasoning in your hearts? <sup>23</sup> Which is easier, to say, Your sins have been forgiven you, or to say, Get up and walk? <sup>24</sup> But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,—He said to the paralytic—I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home (Luke 5.17-24).

Jesus saw the faith of the men and declared He forgave the man's sins. Did Jesus teach salvation by faith? Indeed He did.

What are we to make of these passages? Did Jesus teach contradictory things? Was Jesus playing games? The obvious, unequivocal answer is that in the Jewish economy, faith *and* works were required for salvation.

### **The Gospel of the Kingdom**

John the Baptist came as the herald of the King and proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 3.1-2). Jesus continued John's joyous announcement (Matthew 4.17, 9.35) of the kingdom of God. Water baptism was intrinsic to that salvation message. Water baptism is a *work*. During Jesus' earthly ministry and in the preaching of the Twelve water baptism was *required* for salvation. How do we know this? We know it because that is what the text states. Consider the following verses:

*John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1.4).*

<sup>15</sup> *And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. <sup>16</sup> He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned (Mark 16.15-16).*

<sup>4</sup> *Nicodemus said to Him, How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he? <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (John 3.4-5).*

<sup>36</sup> *Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." <sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.36-38).*

<sup>12</sup> *A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, <sup>13</sup> came to me, and standing near said to me, Brother Saul, receive your sight! And at that very time I looked up at him. <sup>14</sup> And he said, The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. <sup>15</sup> For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. <sup>16</sup> Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name (Acts 22.12-16).*

These passages should convince even the recalcitrant that under the gospel of the kingdom water baptism was required for salvation. Here again, the Scriptures teach works were *required* for salvation.

### The Nature of Faith During the Ministry of Jesus

As seen above, both faith and works were necessary for salvation. What was the nature of this faith? Faith during this period was believing *who Jesus was*. Consider the following passages:

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, Who do people say that the Son of Man is? <sup>14</sup> And they said, Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. <sup>15</sup> He said to them, But who do you say that I am? <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 16.13-17).

Peter believed in the *identity* of Christ—that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. That was his salvation.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. <sup>24</sup> Martha said to Him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this? <sup>27</sup> She said to Him, Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world (John 11.23-27).

Martha believed in the *identity* of Christ: He was the Messiah, the Son of God. That was her faith for salvation.

Consider the testimony of Nathaniel:

*<sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael, and said unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. <sup>46</sup> And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip said unto him, Come and see. <sup>47</sup> Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! <sup>48</sup> Nathanael said unto him, How do you know me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you. <sup>49</sup> Nathanael answered and said unto him, Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel. <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto you, I saw you under the fig tree, you believe? You shall see greater things than these. <sup>51</sup> And he said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.*

Nathaniel believed in the *identity* of Christ—He was the Son of God, the King of Israel.

*<sup>3</sup> As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; <sup>4</sup> and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” <sup>5</sup> And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, <sup>6</sup> but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do” (Acts 9.3-6).*

Saul believed in the *identity* of Christ—that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. That was his salvation. What did Saul preach immediately following his salvation? He preached the identity of Christ:

<sup>19</sup> Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, <sup>20</sup> and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God" (Acts 9.19-20).

This truth is confirmed in the following passages: John 3.18; Acts 2.21, 38, 3.6, 16, 4.7, 10, 12, 17, 18, 30, 5.28, 40-41, 8.12, 16, 9.14-15, 21, 27, 10.43, 48, 19.5, 22.16, 26.9.

### **Faith and Works and the Jerusalem Council**

While the gospel of the kingdom focused upon the identity of Christ, the Lord gave Paul a new message of salvation. The focus of Paul's gospel was not upon the *identity* of Christ but upon the *work* of Christ—that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Paul received his gospel directly from the Lord (Galatians 1.11-12). Paul's gospel was known as the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24). It was different from the "gospel of the kingdom." It was a "secret" ([μυστήριον](#)) the ascended, heavenly Lord revealed to Paul (Romans 2.16, 16.25; 1 Corinthians 9.17; 1 Timothy 1.11). Paul's gospel was faith + 0. No works are involved in Paul's gospel. No keeping of the Mosaic Law is involved in Paul's gospel. No water baptism is required in Paul's gospel. No circumcision is involved. No works are involved. One need only believe Christ died for one's sins and rose from the dead. It is pure grace.

Paul's gospel did not sit well with the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Why should it? They knew nothing of it. God had not revealed it to them. It was contrary to what had been practiced for 1,500 years. God had not told them to stop practicing the Mosaic Law. They had received their gospel, the

gospel of the kingdom, from the Lord during His earthly ministry. Paul, however, received his gospel directly from the Lord in His heavenly ministry. Paul's gospel was different. It did not fit with what the Twelve knew of God's Old Testament program revealed to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets.

Just how different Paul's gospel was from the gospel the Twelve knew is revealed in Luke's record of the Council of Jerusalem in 51 A.D. Luke wrote:

*<sup>1</sup> Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup> And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. <sup>4</sup> When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses" (Acts 15.1-5).*

Members of the Jerusalem assembly were going to Paul's Gentile converts and teaching them that what Paul taught was insufficient for salvation. They told Paul's converts they were not saved. They taught that to be saved one not only had to believe, but be circumcised, and keep the Mosaic Law (Acts 15.1, 5). They taught salvation required faith and works. This message was totally different from what Paul had taught them. As a result, it created great confusion and consternation

(Acts 15.2).

Paul wrote that he went up to Jerusalem by revelation ([ἀποκάλυψις](#), Galatians 2.2). This meant that Paul's going to Jerusalem was not because he or they thought a conference was needed (though they might have). Rather, the risen Lord gave Paul a direct order to go (cf. 1 Corinthians 14.6, 2 Corinthians 12.1, 7; Galatians 1.12, 2.2; Ephesians 3.3). When he arrived, he presented ([ἀνατίθημι](#)) his gospel to the leadership, i.e., James, Peter, and John (Galatians 2.2, 9). This is an interesting piece of information. Many erroneously teach Peter proclaimed the same gospel as Paul and that the gospel has been the same throughout God's program.<sup>2</sup> If so, why did Paul communicate his gospel to them? Would they not have known it? The reason a controversy existed was because Paul proclaimed a *different* gospel from that of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. This was confirmed by Paul's statement of Galatians 2.7 concerning the "gospel of the circumcision" (Peter) and the "gospel of the uncircumcision" (Paul). Thus, Paul wrote:

*<sup>7</sup> But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised <sup>8</sup> (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), <sup>9</sup> and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*

Peter and the Eleven learned the gospel they proclaimed from the Lord in His *earthly* ministry. That ministry was confined to Jews and focused upon the prophetic promise of the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth (Matthew 6.10; Romans 15.8). Paul learned his gospel from the Lord in his

heavenly ministry (Galatians 1.12). Both Peter and Paul received their gospels directly from the Lord. Both were valid. But that was about to change. After much arguing, in which Peter remained silent, Peter finally spoke. He sided with Paul. Luke recorded in Acts 15.7-11:

*<sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; <sup>9</sup> and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."*

Peter's declaration ended the two gospel administration.<sup>3</sup> From this point forward, the gospel of the kingdom was no longer valid. From now on, it was Paul's gospel or nothing (Acts 15.11). One could be saved *only* through Paul's gospel. Because of this decision, Paul wrote these strong words to the Galatians:

*<sup>6</sup> I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; <sup>7</sup> which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup> But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary*



*to what you received, he is to be accursed!*

## **Faith and Works in James**

James wrote his epistle before Acts 15. He knew only the Old Testament prophetic program, the gospel of the kingdom, and the Mosaic Law. He knew nothing of Paul's "secrets" (μυστήριον), or the gospel of grace.<sup>4</sup> The theme or purpose of James' letter was to encourage Jews to endure trials with faith and wisdom which would result in joy (James 1.2–5). James wrote,

*But someone may well say, You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2.18).*

This followed what had been taught throughout the entire Old Testament and the Gospels. It was consistent with the Lord's earthly ministry. No one had told him or any of the Twelve that the Mosaic Law was over. No one had told him to stop proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and to believe Jesus was the Messiah. No one had told him a person only needed to believe Christ died for his sins and had risen from the dead to be saved. Such good news was unknown to the Twelve and the leaders of the Jerusalem assembly. It was not until the Council of Jerusalem that this matter came to a head and was resolved by Peter's siding with Paul. Luther was right. We do not find Paul's doctrines of grace, faith, absence of the Mosaic Law, the resurrection, the believer's identity with Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit, etc. in James. Why not? Because James knew *nothing* of these doctrines. These were doctrines the ascended, glorified Lord gave to Paul. Only after Paul began to teach these things did the Twelve have any understanding of these doctrines. They were Pauline revelations, given to Paul by the ascended, glorified Lord.

James reads like an Old Testament book because that is what it

is. When James wrote his letter he was still operating under the Mosaic Law. Even following the Council of Jerusalem, he could not fully comprehend the implications of that decision. How do we know this? Luke wrote:

*<sup>17</sup> After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. <sup>18</sup> And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup> After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup> And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law (Acts 21.17-20).*

James greeted Paul and rejoiced with him about the salvation of the Gentiles. But James' primary joy was centered upon the salvation of Jews and that they were zealous for the Law! He still didn't get it! God had spent 1,500 years pounding in the Law. Now, He couldn't get it out of them!

The Mosaic Law was a hard pull. Even after Peter made his pronouncement at the Council he dissimulated so that Paul upbraided him at Antioch:

*<sup>11</sup> But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup> For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. <sup>13</sup> The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup> But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews,*

*how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews (Galatians 2.11-14)?*

Peter repented of this failure. But even at the end of his life, he found Paul's doctrines difficult to comprehend. They were hard to understand because he was still steeped in the Mosaic Law. But one thing he knew: Paul was right. Peter's last written words were the following;

*<sup>14</sup> Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, <sup>15</sup> and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, <sup>16</sup> as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3.14-16).*

Peter recognized God had given revelations to Paul that He had not revealed to the Twelve. He recognized believers were to go to Paul for their doctrine, that what Paul had written was Scripture, on par with Moses and the prophets. To reject Paul was to warrant God's condemnation for only in Paul's letters do we have *doctrine* for the Church, the body of Christ. To reject Paul's letters is to reject the revelation the Lord Jesus Christ gave to Paul when He commissioned him as the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13), the founder of the Church, the body of Christ.

## **Conclusion**

Salvation in the Old Testament involved faith and works. James wrote from this perspective. The ascended, glorified Lord revealed to Paul a gospel He had kept hidden, that required faith alone for salvation. Both James and Paul were correct.

But each must be understood in its proper context and timeframe.

James does not contradict Paul. When James wrote, faith and works were required for salvation. Acts is a transitional book and Luke wrote Acts primarily to explain to Jews why the kingdom of God did not come to Israel and why God saved Paul to be the apostle of the Gentiles. For a time, both programs, Israel and the Church, and both gospels, the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God were valid. At the conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem, only one gospel remained: Paul's gospel. When the Church, the body of Christ, is complete, what Paul described as "the fullness of the Gentiles" (Romans 11.25), God will restart the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 24.14). From this period until the Lord returns, the focus of the gospel and the substance of faith will return to the *identity* of Christ. That is the story of the book of Revelation: who is the true Messiah?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews expressed this thought thus: "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united [[συγκεράννυμι](#)] by faith in those who heard" (Hebrews 4.2). Christ's sacrifice paid for everyone's sin. But His work is not effective for the individual until he takes it by faith. Faith is the means by which the sinner appropriates Christ's work on his behalf to himself. Christ's death on the cross satisfied God's justice. This is the doctrine of unlimited atonement. Christ paid for the sins of every person, satisfying the justice of God, but His death is effective only for those who will believe.

<sup>2</sup> Such teaching is without Scriptural support.

<sup>3</sup> Peter's stunning declaration can hardly be overemphasized. Peter's statement declared Jews were now going to have to be saved like Paul's Gentiles. This was unheard of and overturned 1,500 years of theology. See the author's article, [The Great](#)

[Hinge](#), for an exposition of this passage.

<sup>4</sup> See the author's study on Paul's "[secrets](#)" for a fuller treatment of this subject.

<sup>5</sup> See the author's [study](#) on Revelation for this discussion.

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