

### Interpreting James 2:1

(iii) *Saved in the eyes of another person – but this is not James' point here*

(iv) *Three tenses of salvation and James is not here referring to the past but rather present and future – but this does not do justice to James' words*

### A correct approach

(v) *A correct approach – noticing the preceding context – acts of mercy towards the poor*

• *The use of the word save*

• *Transitive – not reflexive*

• *He is saying 'Faith cannot save anyone else, can it?'*

James says: *'What is the profit to anyone else, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but he does not have works; faith cannot save anyone, can it?'* We are considering some lines of interpretation that have been followed.

(iii) Some emphasize that James is referring to what 'someone says' to another person. It is said: James is dealing with being saved **in the eyes of another person**. If I see you claiming faith but I can see no change in your life I am likely to say 'Faith cannot save anyone, can it?' for it seems it has not saved you! The inconsistent Christian and the pretend-Christian are difficult **for others** to tell apart. However I doubt whether this is exactly James' point.

(iv) It is much more helpful to keep in mind the three tenses of salvation. Some say 'save' means 'preserve from the deadly consequences of sin', 'save from spiritual decay'. In the New Testament 'save' has a variety of uses. 'Salvation' has three tenses. **We have been 'saved'** (from our status as sinners, our condemnation to hell, our state of spiritual-deadness). This 'initial' salvation involves no activity on our part. It is passively received. But there are later stages of salvation where we are more involved. **We are being saved** (progressively delivered from the bad habits that sin has left within us, increasingly growing like Jesus), and **we shall be saved** (brought to final glory, given our reward for the way we have laid up treasure in heaven). Some take James as saying 'You have been saved in once sense by faith alone, but if you are to be progressively delivered from the bad habits that sin has left within us, increasingly growing like Jesus, and if you are to reach the fullness of heavenly reward, you must work out your faith in godly living – including mercy towards the downtrodden.' However, I still don't think this does justice to James' words. *'Faith cannot save anyone, can it?'* requires a clearer exposition. I would still like to explore another possibility.

(v) So I come to the approach that I think it basically correct.<sup>1</sup> **Notice the preceding context.** It is all about helping the poor. We are not to discriminate. The poor may be rich in faith but they need help. We are to show love to everyone and discriminate against no one. We are to keep the royal law of Scripture. Our basic salvation is not in doubt! We are not to 'murder' the poor by our discrimination. We are to **act** in mercy. We are to **do** something in mercy towards the needy. Now James says: *'Faith cannot save anyone, can it?'*

Notice **the use of the word 'save'**. It comes in James 1:21 ('able to save your souls'); 4:12 (God is able 'to save and destroy'); 5:15 ('the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick'); and 5:20 ('he who turns around a sinner ... will save his soul ...'). In each place (and in James 2:14) the word 'save' means 'save someone else'.

The word 'save' in James never has a reflexive force (it never means 'gets himself saved'); it always has a transitive force (that is, it always means, in James, 'to save someone else'). In 1:21 ('able to save your souls') the word 'save' has an object. But in James 2:14 James did not write 'Can faith save your own soul?' – using the person himself as the object of the saving. In 4:12 God does not save himself; He saves a person. In 5:15 prayer saves the health of another person. In 5:20 the Christian 'saves' someone else by turning him away from sin. In James 2:14 the writer is not saying 'Faith cannot save you yourself'; he is saying 'Faith cannot save anyone else, can it?' The 'him' in James 2:14 refers to the poor man who has been the subject of the discussion all along. We can bring out the meaning if we translate *'Faith alone cannot save anyone, can it?'*

• Notice the following context – Rahab saved the spies by doing something

• Three further comments relating to the use of the Greek language

• Works of mercy towards the poor is necessary to save anyone else and to fulfil one's faith

• The topic is whether the faith of the well-wisher is of any value to the other person – without works it is not

**Notice the following context.** It shows what is on James' mind, for he goes on to say: If you see a poor person in need but you not do anything for him, you do not achieve anything in his life. You do not save him. You do not rescue him. Rahab had faith but she saved the spies of Joshua 2 by **doing** something. It all confirms that James means that simply having and talking about your faith without doing anything has no impact upon the lives of any other people. *'Faith alone cannot save anyone, can it?'*

I ought to add some further comments. (i) A series of pronouns 'he ... he ... he' is much more likely to involve changes of person in Greek than in English. In Matthew 12:10, for example 'there was a man having a withered hand . . . and they questioned him...'. The 'him' refers to Jesus. A few lines later in Matthew 12:13–14 it says 'he stretched it forth... The Pharisees held a consultation against him'. The first 'he' is the man; the second is Jesus. (ii) The 'him' or 'anyone' of James 2:14 picks up mention of 'the poor man' of James 2:2, 3. This might be thought too far back in the text. But in Hellenistic Greek this is not a problem. In Matthew 22:15 'him' refers to Jesus mentioned explicitly in Matthew 22:1 more than 220 words back in the text. (iii) Greek lexicographers recognize the flexibility of *auton* – the word used in James 2:14. One lexicon says *auton* may 'be used inexactly in a series referring to different persons'.<sup>2</sup> Another says it 'is used rather laxly, where the subject or object to which it must be referred is not expressly indicated, but must be gathered from some preceding name... or from the context'.<sup>3</sup>

I interpret James 2:14 then as follows: James is in a section of his letter which follows on closely from James 2:1–13. He has rebuked discrimination against the poor person<sup>1</sup> and he has asked his friends to keep the royal law of love<sup>2</sup>. Now he argues that m.

He assures his friends of their salvation, calling them his 'brothers and sisters'. Then he says: what is the value to anyone else of speaking of one's faith but not taking action when he finds others in need. In verses 15–16 he makes it clear that this is indeed his point. *'If a brother or sister is without clothes and in need of daily food<sup>1</sup>, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat well"– and yet you do not give them the things they need for the body, what is the use of that?'*<sup>2</sup> The topic is not the salvation of the well-wisher himself. The topic is whether the faith of the well-wisher is of any value to the other person. Faith without works might be the starting-point of salvation. But if it stays without works it will be a frustrated faith at best, and it is certainly entirely useless for helping anyone else.

**Notes**

1. I owe the basic interpretation here to Dr R.T. Kendall, minister of Westminster Chapel, London, 1976–2001.
2. See W.F. Arndt & F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1979), p. 123.
3. J.H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon* (1889 ed.), pp. 86–87.

1 2:1-7  
2 2:8-13

1 2:15  
2 2:16



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