What are “works” and how do they fit in with the salvation message?

This continues from the previous 3 Questions, so make sure you’ve read those before you read on.

The main thing to have in place when discussing how “works” fit in with the salvation message is the fact that man is three-part being, not a two-part being. He is *spirit* and *soul* and *body*. When man initially believes in Jesus and is “saved,” this impacts his inner spirit, which is *made alive*—it is saved from death. From that point onward, he/she has the ability to understand spiritual matters (1 Cor. 2:1-16), though at the same time he/she possesses a corrupted soul/sin nature; he/she then has free will and can choose whether to follow the Spirit or follow the flesh, to die to the “I will” and live according to “God wills.” Initial salvation can never be lost or given back and it pertains to the ages unto the ages (what we think of as “forever”), *following* the coming age of the kingdom of Christ. (You will learn more about this in the following Questions.)

Initial salvation *pertaining to the spirit* is a past aspect of salvation. Salvation *pertaining to our soul* is a present and future aspect of salvation—we are in the process of “being saved” as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phlp 2:12), and we hope to be yet saved (*future*, Rom. 5:9), receiving the goal of our faith, the salvation of our soul (1 Pet. 1:3-9). This present aspect affects the future salvation (lose your life/soul now to pick it up again later, Matt. 16:24-27) and has to do with entrance into the kingdom of our Lord Jesus (a kingdom which lasts 1,000 years).

This particular question about “works” tends to be at the forefront of a lot of the differing Christian beliefs out there, and is usually presented as something that Scripture contradicts itself on (which it never does). The following passages cause a lot of contention—

> James 2:14-26
> What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe--and tremble! 20 **But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?**
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> 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

And then compare it to what Paul writes to the church at Rome—

> Romans 3:27-4:9
> Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. 29 Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, 30 since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. 31 Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.
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> 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." 4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. 5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, 6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin." 9 Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

These two passages do not contradict each other. God is NOT the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). So let's break these down a bit to see clearly what they are saying, starting with a review/clarification of what we've seen so far:

Being "justified" or made "just" ("just" and "righteous" are the same word in Greek and Hebrew) simply means "to be made to conform to God's standard of '*right*.'" It means that we, as sinful creatures, need to be made "righteous/just" in order to stand in God's sight, for He is holy. (For more information on this, please read "The Word of the Kingdom" study, Part II pages 16-23.)

God is the only One who can impart righteousness to/on a person (another way of saying "justify" someone). Man cannot, in any way, make himself "righteous."

Just as salvation and life need to be realized relative to each part of man's being—spirit, soul and body—justification needs to be realized to each part as well. These are all similar words that pertain to the fact that man is born separated from God due to sin, continues to be separated from God (in his fellowship with God, not his standing) if/when he continues in his sin, and will be separated from God if sin is not dealt with. Sin results in death, which means *separation from God*. We need to be saved from death/saved from sin, given life, and made righteous in order to be fully redeemed and stand in God's presence. PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE.

That doesn't mean there are three courtrooms. Scripture shows us *two* judgments. The first is the moment a man believes: his spirit is made alive, and he is made righteous before God on the ground of Christ's blood alone. That verdict is never reopened (Rom. 3:24-26; 11:29). The second is at the

Judgment Seat of Christ, where soul and body are judged together on what was done in the body (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Thess. 5:23). In between is the walk. When a Christian sins, it doesn't touch his standing; it breaks his fellowship with God (Isa. 59:2). He agrees with God about it, and he is forgiven and cleansed by the blood that is already on the mercy seat, applied by our High Priest (1 John 1:9; Heb. 7:25). No new judgment is convened. He is counted righteous along the way.

So let's review the passage from James:

- Faith simply means belief (same word, to "have faith in" simply means "to believe in"). James says "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead [it's there, but it does nothing, like a body without breath, v. 26]." James says it elsewhere this way, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22).
- Faith/belief (no works involved) is necessary for initial salvation (Acts 16:30-31). Faith is also necessary every single day afterwards, for God requires us to believe in His Word and obey His Word; He expects us to live by faith, "The just shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:3-4).
- Everyday faith/belief is necessary to receive the goal of our faith, which is *the salvation of our soul* (life in the kingdom age), 1 Peter 1:1-9, Hebrews 10:36-11:3.
- So James is telling us that our everyday FAITH/BELIEF means nothing if we do not have actions that back up our beliefs. If we do not **act** according to what we **believe**, then our faith is useless; *it means nothing*.
- If we, like Abraham, ACT on our beliefs, then we will be justified accordingly (presently and yet future), as Abraham was/will be. Our FAITH/BELIEF is made *perfect* (literally "complete") through obedient acts that are done according to what we believe God has said.
- Faith/belief can NEVER be apart from what God has said.
- Abraham believed in what God had said *so fully* (regarding God telling him that the promises would come through his son, Isaac) that Abraham was willing to *kill* Isaac, knowing wholeheartedly that God would still fulfill his promises, even if it meant bringing Isaac back from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19). 100% belief with NO doubt whatsoever.
- Faithful acts can only be done through the power of God's Spirit, never by the power of our own flesh and will.
- This is why God justifies us (present and future) based on faithful obedience. He's the One we've let work in us.
- The justification that comes by works done in faith is declared at the Judgment Seat of Christ; it is NOT referencing initial justification/salvation, that which only requires belief/faith.

Now on to what Paul says:

- The context in Paul's letter is about deeds of the law (apart from faith) versus faith (specifically circumcision, since that was a point of contention between the Jews and Gentiles in the newly created church.) Paul is not talking about faith *with works* and faith *without works* as James talks about.
- Paul and James use the same verse from Genesis 15:6, "And he [Abraham] believed the Lord and He [God] accounted it to him for righteousness." James uses it relative to Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac, which occurred in Gen. 22:1-18. Paul uses it relative to its context in Gen. 15, when Abraham believed that God would deliver on his promises concerning the land

and a reward (which he knew would be through his descendants), even though he was childless and both he and Sarai were too old to have children themselves. Same verse, different applications. And Gen. 15:6 is not the moment Abraham was first saved; he had already left Ur by faith years before (Heb. 11:8). It's the first time Scripture writes down believing and righteousness accounted together.

- Paul is contending with Jewish men in the church who've kept the Law all their life (and wanted the Gentile believers to keep it too), telling them that they no longer need to go through all of the physical demonstrations of keeping the Mosaic Law; Jesus' death and resurrection has made them unnecessary (not that they were *never* necessary).
- These Jewish men were already God's people before they ever heard of Jesus—redeemed, each one having come under the blood of the Passover lamb by believing God (Exod. 12:13). Believing that Jesus was that Lamb and their Messiah didn't give them a second first-salvation; it made them eligible for the heavenly inheritance being offered to their nation. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had been "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12), and believing brought them from death to life. Two different starting points, but both came the same way, by faith (Rom. 3:22).
- This he makes even more clear because the Gentiles now are partakers of the same heavenly inheritance that the nation of Israel was offered; they aren't under the Law, yet are still righteous through faith.
- <u>The thrust of Paul's passage is that Abraham was not made righteous by works of the Law</u> (specifically circumcision) because that came afterwards (his belief was accounted for righteousness in Gen. 15:6 when he was between 75-85 years old, and the sign of circumcision was given when he was 99 years old, Gen. 17:10, 24). Clearly Abraham did not have to perform ceremonial physical acts of obedience in order to be seen as "righteous" in God's eyes. Abraham just believed what God had said. And that belief, that FAITH, was accounted to him as righteousness.
- In like manner, the Jews who had believed in Jesus no longer needed to do the physical work of the Mosaic Law because they were now rendered useless. They needed to understand that NOW they simply need to continue to *believe* in order to be righteous.
- Paul does describe the verdict God hands down the moment a man believes (Rom. 3:21-26), but he describes it to people who already have it, to settle the argument over the Law. And his point holds all the way through: the deeds of the Law are never what God counts as righteousness—not when a man first believes, and not in the righteous way of living once he's first believed (Rom. 4:12).
- Righteousness is accounted to the one who believes in (*has faith in*) the fact that God Himself justifies the ungodly by forgiving our lawless deeds and covers our sin (see 1 John 1:8-10). <u>Deeds of the Law do not do it. God does it and will do it based on faith.</u> (This is true of the past aspect of salvation, and it's just as true of the present aspect of salvation—*day by day by day*.)
- Paul is not saying works aren't necessary, nor is he saying works don't have a place with faith. He's contrasting faithless works of the Law with FAITH WITHOUT THE LAW.

Acts of obedience are "works." These can be, *and most usually are*, inward acts that are not visible to those around us. "Works" are submitting to the Word of God (God's will, not yours), having your heart

cleansed from within, getting all thoughts and actions under the leading of the Spirit and submitting to God's will in all things.

Sometimes "works" are visible to others. Charity, kindness, truth telling, being merciful and forgiving, and we could go on and on.

"Works" can be summed up as follows:

Our works have no place in initial salvation; Jesus did the work on the cross, we believe, we are saved/made righteous (relative to our spirit).
Consequent to that event, as we journey through this life:

Works (of the Law) without faith are not accepted by God.

Faith without WORKS BASED ON FAITH is *useless* (no reward, no approval).

Faith with WORKS BASED ON FAITH is righteousness and leads to the salvation of the soul.