



# Part 39: Almost There

# Word ALIVE



## Background Notes -

**PURPOSE:** To present the non-Pauline apostolic letters. These correct a misconception that good works are no longer necessary to a Christian once he is saved. They boost the morale of the early Christians who were seen as “different” (which in fact, we are!). We also find the definitions of true followers, and of “antichrists”.

**AUTHOR:** The apostles James, Peter, and John.

**DATE:** James, around 58-60, Peter, around 62-67, John around 95.

**STYLE:** Unlike the dogmatic treatises of Paul, James writes in moral sentences which assume a faith in Christ when exhorting to good works. Peter writes a morale-booster. John’s writings sound like an encyclical. All three exhort people to be ready always for the Lord’s return.



## Opening Quotes

- 📖 “God tempts no one.” Jm 1:13
- 📖 “Faith without works, is dead.” Jm 2:14
- 📖 “You see, a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Jm 2:24
- 📖 “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.” Jm 4:3
- 📖 “There is cause for rejoicing. You may for a time have to suffer distress, but this is so your faith, more precious than fire-tried gold, may lead to glory and honor when the Lord appears.” 1 P 1:6
- 📖 “Through Christ you are believers in God, the God who raised him from the dead.” 1 P 1:21
- 📖 “Be ready to explain the hope that is within you, but always with gentleness and reverence.” 1P 3:15
- 📖 “Baptism now saves you, not as removal of dirt, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection...” 1 P 3:21
- 📖 “See what love the Father has bestowed on us in letting us be called children of God! Yet that in fact is what we are.” 1 Jn 3:1
- 📖 “The man who claims, ‘I have known Christ,’ without keeping his commandments, is a liar.” 1 Jn 2:3
- 📖 “Anyone who has knowledge of God gives us a hearing, while anyone who is not of God refuses to hear us. Thus do we distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of deception.” 1 Jn 4:6

| 📖 the BIG PICTURE |                        | ↔ : LAW, History, Writings, Prophets |  | ↔ : key covenants in our Father’s plan |   |
|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|
|                   | 12 Periods ▼           | Plot ▼                               | Other books related to period ▼  |  | 📖 stories in each period ▼  |
| BC                | 🌐 THE BEGINNINGS       | GN 1-11                              | Ps 8, 104  |  | Creation, Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah’s ark, Tower of Babel   |
| 1850              | 🔱 THE PATRIARCHS       | GN 12-50                             |  |  | Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Melchizedek   |
| 1250              | ⚠️ EXODUS FROM EGYPT   | EX                                   |  |  | Moses, the burning bush, the plagues, passover, exodus  |
| 1200              | ♣️ JOURNEY TO CANAAN   | NM, Jos                              | LV, DT   |  | Sinai desert, 10 commandments, Levites, Law, Joshua   |
| 1100              | 👤 THE JUDGE CYCLE      | Jg                                   | Ruth   |  | 12 tribes, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Samuel   |
| 1030              | 🌟 KINGS & PROPHETS     | 1 & 2 S                              | 1 Ch, Ps, Prov   |  | Saul, David, Solomon, Jerusalem, the Temple   |
| 1000              | 🗡️ THE DIVIDED KINGDOM | 1 Kg                                 | 2 Ch, Prov,  |  | Israel (N), Judah (S), Elijah & Elisha, Isaiah, Assyrian exile  |
| 721<br>587        | 🌀 BABYLONIAN EXILE     | 2 Kg                                 | 2 Ch, Tob, Hos, Am, Hab, Is, Jer, Lam, Jl, Mic, Zp, Jon, Nah, Ob, Ez, Dan, Bar       |  | Babylonians, “major” prophets, Isaiah (to Israel), Jeremiah (to Jerusalem), Ezekiel (to the Exiles)       |
| 538               | ⚙️ THE RESTORATION     | Ezr, Neh                             | Est, Judith, Hag, Zech, Mal, Job, Ecc, Songs   |  | Cyrus, 2nd temple, 2nd Law, “minor” prophets, new writings  |
| 163<br>63         | 🕯️ THE REPURIFICATION  | 1 Mac                                | Dn, 2Mac, Sirach, Wisdom   |  | Greeks, Maccabean revolt, Hasmonean Dynasty, Romans, Jewish sects (Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, Essenes) |
| AD                | ✝️ JESUS CHRIST        | LK                                   | MT, MK, JN   |  | Incarnation, Good News, New Law, Cross & Resurrection   |
| 33<br>70          | 🕯️ APOSTOLIC CHURCH    | Acts                                 | Rm, 1&2Co, Ga, Ep, Phil, Col, 1&2Th, 1&2 Tm, Ti, Phm, Hb, Ja, 1P, 2P, 1,2&3J, Jd, Rv |  | Pentecost, council, journeys, epistles, Body/Bride of Christ  |



## The Story of Part 39: Almost There



If we are saved by faith in Christ, apart from works of the Jewish Law, were good works then no longer necessary for salvation? “By no means!” to use Paul’s expression. Christ himself said he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. When Paul said that Christ “abolished the Law and its ordinances,” he was rejecting the belief that those who were not Jewish and didn’t followed the Law could not be saved. He insisted that faith in Christ, not adherence to the Jewish Law, was the way to salvation. The same applies to good works in general. No amount of good works can count as “credit” towards salvation, as if God owed us. God is not simply just but also merciful, and his grace is a free gift.

But neither can simply professing faith in Christ save you. Paul said in Romans “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe *in your heart* that God raised him, you will be saved.” But since Christ himself declared, “Not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom, but he who does the will of my Father,” it can be seen that only belief that comes *from the heart* does the will of the Father. Real faith is not simply in the head. Even the demons believe, James tells us, and they shudder! Can faith alone save you? Imagine telling the poor and the naked, “Good luck, keep warm and eat well,” but then giving them neither food nor clothing! “Show me your faith without works,” says James, “and I’ll show you the faith that underlies my works!” He then clarified that Abraham was justified not because he said he had faith, but because he acted on it.

Christ said that what makes a man clean or unclean is not the food that goes into the mouth, but the things that come out of it. He had also said that the mouth reveals what is in the heart. Taking these words seriously, James compared the tongue to a wild animal. If controlling our bodies is difficult enough, controlling our wicked tongues is even harder!

Faith is not simply a matter of belief, or a matter of acting, but also a matter of *trust*. James explains this as the reason for unanswered prayers. Why do we not always get what we pray for, if we ask it in Jesus’ name? It is because we doubt that Jesus is answering us with what we truly *need*. James calls us to acknowledge that our prayers often focus on something that we desire in this world, in spite of what would bring us closer to eternal happiness, which may or may not coincide with our worldly wants!

He finally exhorts his listeners not to be impatient with the Lord’s return, just as a farmer patiently waits for the harvest that he trusts will come.

The apostle Peter, in his letters, is rallying the faith of the new Christians. He tells them that while life as a Christian entails suffering and persecution, there is cause for great joy in light of the glory that awaits us because of our real faith in Christ. Having been redeemed by his blood, the blood of the truly spotless lamb of God, we

have become the chosen race, a royal and priestly people. And if the master had to suffer for our sins, then we can join our own suffering to his and find our redemption. Called “the Rock” by Christ himself, Peter humbly acknowledges that Christ is the living stone. Anyone who puts faith in him will not be shaken.

Peter then exhorts the Christians to be ready to explain the hope that is within them to anyone who questions their faith, but to always do this with gentleness and reverence. After all, how can anyone proclaim the Gospel without doing it in a loving way? As Paul had made clear earlier, “If I have a faith that can move mountains, but don’t have love, I’m nothing!” Peter reminds us that Christ himself was wrongfully insulted. We become just like him when people insult us for being Christians! Christ did not deem it shameful to become one of us. We should not find shame in being wronged just like he was.

Using an analogy, just as Noah and his family were saved from the flood, we are now saved through the baptismal waters that initiate us into God’s family. Baptism is the new circumcision. Baptism removes not a physical stain, but the inherited guilt of original sin. It is, then, a pledge to God for a clear conscience founded firmly on the resurrection of Christ.

Ending his letters like James, Peter then tells his listeners to be patient with the Lord’s return. “In the Lord’s eyes, one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years are as a day.” Peter repeats Christ’s own words, that Christ will return like a thief in the night. Bottom line: be prepared!

The apostle John in his letters was fighting wrong interpretations of the Gospel as well. To him there were three clear signs that characterize a real Christian: (1) real conversion, (not that someone would never sin again, but that sin was no longer considered acceptable, but to be fought at all costs); (2) true love of fellow believers (after all, how could you claim to love the invisible God and not his visible children?); (3) confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. John insists that failure to acknowledge Jesus as God in the flesh is an influence not of God but of the “antichrist,” who is already in the world. John’s litmus test to determine whether someone belongs to “the world” or to God, whether someone has the spirit of deception or the spirit of truth, is whether a person is even willing to give the disciple a hearing. Anyone whom God calls will not refuse a hearing.

John is driven with the conviction that anyone who truly loves the Father will truly love his Son once they open their hearts to him. “The power that has conquered the world is this faith of ours.” And so, even with the antichrist in the midst of the world, our victory is assured. We know how the story ends.



## Defending the Faith: Saved by Faith or Works?

*"Catholics think they're saved by faith and works. This contradicts the Scripture which teaches, as Luther taught, that we are saved by faith alone."*

Luther was absolutely right when he said that we don't earn our salvation. But he was absolutely wrong when he changed the expression "we are saved by faith apart from works" to "we are saved by faith *alone*." In fact, the only passage in the Bible with the phrase "faith alone" is: "You see, then, that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jm 2:24)! (Luther was not very fond of James!) But James does not say works alone. He assumes a faith in Christ. When Paul says that we are saved by faith apart from works, he is talking about the Jewish law, with its precepts and ordinances, which by the time of the Pharisees, had become so cumbersome that it led many Jews to despair of their salvation. Even the Church today can seem too "works oriented" like the Jewish Law. Only a *living* faith in Christ will see that moral laws and good works do not compete with faith, but complete it.

One way to see how we are *not* saved is by looking at the two extremes. The fideist, or antinomian ("faith alone" or "anti-law") insists that good works have nothing whatsoever to do with salvation. The self-justifier, on the other hand, believes "I can get to heaven as long as I'm basically good", or "as long as I do this or that." The fideist fails to see that faith is not simply a matter of belief. Even demons believe – and shudder (Jm 2:19)! Faith, as in *faithfulness*, implies obedience, which Paul stresses constantly. The self-justifier, on the other hand, in trying to be "good" evades the question, "good according to *who*?" If we set ourselves up as the arbiters of God's grace, we make ourselves God and disregard his public revelation to us through his Word, which was made flesh. Jesus appealed repeatedly to faith *and* repeatedly to good

works (for example, Jn 8:24, Jn 10:38, Jn 11:25, Mt 7:21, Mt 25:32-46).

Some "believers" assume that God must damn all non-Christians. But there is a real difference between a stubborn refusal to believe in Christ out of self-pride (as in Jn 11:48), and unintentional ignorance (as in Rom 2:15). This is a difference only God can know. But to say you believe in Christ and then consciously disobey his commands is an insult to him. To suggest that you can work your own way into heaven is an insult to what he did for us. We owe him not just our natural lives, but our redeemed lives. We have been bought at the price of his blood.

We must also not take our belief for granted and assume that we *cannot* lose our salvation. This is unscriptural and dangerous (see "Predestination and Free Will"). We must guard and nourish our faith. God's grace does not remove our free will, for God is a loving Father, not a tyrant. For this reason Paul can say "work out your salvation in fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12), and at the same time that serving God is not a matter of falling into fear, because we are his children (Rom 8:15). So while the world recites its creed – "Believe in yourself!" – let God's children live their creed, "Believe in him!" A true faith in Christ will reveal that we are sinners, constantly in need of mercy, but that we are saved through him.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand the relationship between faith and good works is to remember that true faith encompasses belief, trust, and obedience. You cannot have one without the other. In short, the answer to "faith or good works" is "good faith works!"



## Expressing the Faith: We Can Make a Difference

The words "good luck, keep warm and eat well" are dead without real love, clothing and food.

*We live in a dream if we really think everything's alright  
This world is in need crying out to be freed  
We gotta shed some light*

***Teach the world to smile and hear angels sing  
Feel the breath of God and the power it brings  
It's time to come together, you and I  
And share the love of Jesus Christ***

***(Chorus):  
We can make a difference, we can make a change  
We can make the world a better place***

***We can make a difference, we can make a change  
We can make the sun shine through the rain***

*Do you know a man who's needing a hand?  
Don't you walk on by  
A sister is sad, lost all that she had  
We gotta take the time  
Look around your world, it will testify  
Some have empty hearts, some have hungry eyes  
God can heal the suffering through our hands  
Find compassion, take a stand*

***(chorus)***

↗ **Next time: "In the end..."** ↖