SOUND DOCTRINE FOR SPIRITUAL SUCCESS – Studies in Romans
The Harmony of Scripture (Romans 4:17-22; cf. James 2:21-23)

"Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform."

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the alter? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,' and he was called the friend of God.'"

At times, it may seem that the writings of Paul are in direct conflict with what James writes in chapter two of his epistle. But the example of Abraham proves to us the falsehood of such an impression. Paul cites one example of Abraham's faith in Romans 4:18-22, while James mentions another in James 2:21-24. Both authors quote from Genesis 15:6 in proving their point (Romans 4:22; James 2:23). And the point neither man is seeking to make involves Abraham's righteous standing before God and its apparent need for being maintained, renewed or re-established.

In both instances, Abraham exercises faith in the power of God to overrule the circumstance he was facing. In Paul's example, Abraham and Sarah were beyond the years of childbearing, yet God promised them a child from their own bodies (Genesis 17:15-19). With James, Abraham is told by God to sacrifice the very child which He promised would the heir of a multitude of descendants. In each case, Abraham's faith was in the power of God to resurrect their dead bodies (his own, Sarah's and Isaac's; cf. Romans 4:19-21; Hebrews 11:17-19) and fulfill His promise. His faith did not waver in the face of those daunting situations but grew strong instead. In both tests of his faith, Abraham's righteous standing before God was NEVER in jeopardy. Yet those tests served to develop Abraham's faith more fully, confirming the genuineness of his belief in God's promise given to him in Genesis 15:5-6.

Isn't that precisely what James is teaching us in James 2:21-23? On the surface, it may seem that he is contradicting Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. But he is not. Instead, he uses the example of Abraham to prove that a truly justified individual will express that righteous standing before God with a living faith marked by good works (James 2:17). Paul does the same in Ephesians 2:8-10. After affirming our salvation as an act of grace though faith, apart from works, Paul even appears to contradict himself in Ephesians 2:10 –

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

Yet there is no contradiction! Just as it is impossible for anyone to achieve a righteous standing before God on their own merits, it is equally hopeless to maintain such a standing through our obedience, since the standard for both is sinless perfection. As Paul will declare to us in Romans 5:2, our standing before God will always be on the basis of His grace and not our goodness. It is only by such a standing in His grace, are we then able to pursue a lifestyle of good works.