

The Action of Faith Part 3

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James 2:20-26

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 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.

This is one of those passages that some have great difficulty with. Martin Luther had a serious problem with the book of James, in particular because of the text before us today. You need to understand the context with which he read this text. He came out of a Roman Catholic background believing faith could not save him, only faith with works could save. When God was gracious to open his eyes to the reality that it was by grace through faith and not by works that we are saved, he could never quite grasp what the Apostle James was saying.

James was not talking about the doctrine of justification by faith alone, a doctrine which we uphold and celebrate. It is the very heart of the Gospel that we are declared right with God when we place our confidence and faith in His Son. No other work is required. No religious feats are to be achieved in order to be rendered acceptable to God. It is through Christ and faith alone. But James is dealing with a faulty extreme that says, "I'm saved by grace and it doesn't matter how I live." This is what James is dealing with. To deal with it, James wants the audience to understand how faith works. And that is it—faith works. That's the point.

In this message our goal is to take the first two sermons and put them together in explaining how faith works and can grow in you. Let's begin by briefly recapping the last two messages. Every person has the capacity to exercise faith in someone or something. Faith is not reserved to Christians; any person is capable of exercising faith in something. Only faith in God is exclusively Christian. Only the child of God can place trust in God. But everyone everyday exhibits faith. When you give yourself, that is to commit yourself, to a person, an object, or an idea you are demonstrating faith.

Faith, in its simplest definition, is acting like something is real. That's all faith is, whether it's faith in God or something else. Faith is believing something is true and then you act in a way that you believe it is true.

In last week's sermon we discussed the four building blocks or components of faith. You must have all four for it to be genuine faith, whether it's in Christ or in someone else or an idea. They are:

1) An object

If you're going to have faith, you have to put your faith in something. If Christ is the object of the believer, then I have to look away from me and to Christ. Faith never looks to faith. Faith in faith will never work in the Christian's life or in the ungodly man's life. That's not how faith works. Faith is never in self, it's in an object it looks toward.

2) Knowledge of the object

You have to know something about that object in order to be able to have confidence. You have to have information; you have to have facts. You can have great faith about something that's not true, and often we do, do we not? You exercise faith when you believe a lie and you have accepted the statements to be true when they're not. Of course, you do not know that it's false. The whole basis of deception is believing something to be true when it isn't. You have to have knowledge about an object, if you're going to have faith in that object.

3) Confidence in the object

Once you have an object and you know something about it, it leads you to believe that you can put confidence in that object. That's the third component. Confidence or certainty. With confidence, you have a feeling or an emotional sense that you have confidence. Emotions are always, with rare exception, attached to a thought. You don't feel the way you feel for no reason. You feel that way because of a thought. There are involuntary emotions but we're not talking about that. Most of our sadness or joy, happiness or sorrow, is based on a thought. Thus, my confidence in someone or something is based upon a thought or the knowledge that I have acquired about that object.

Now, with certainty or confidence, there is always a range of probability. I can feel about 50 percent sure of somebody's trustworthiness or I can feel 95 percent sure or 100 percent sure. Your feelings of confidence in someone are based upon your confidence in the facts you've acquired about that object.

There is a fourth building block and without it there is no faith.

4) Commitment to the object

In other words, you act out confidence in the object. I've learned some things about Jesus, therefore my certainty and confidence is at a level where I am willing to commit to Him. I'm willing to get out of the boat and order my life according to what He has commanded. That's commitment.

When you have all four of those things converging at the same time, you have faith.

In the first sermon, I defined and illustrated two kinds of faith. One looks and sounds real but isn't, not even by the standards of the non-Christian world. I call it *abstract faith*. James calls it "faith without works." This is demonstrated in Peter and we showed in Luke 22. Peter had this kind of faith when he promised the Lord Jesus that he would not deny Him but was willing to die for Him. Peter truly believed what he said was true. He thought he would remain faithful to Jesus and not deny Him. We can say that Peter believed this to be true, and for this reason, we call it a kind of faith. But since he did not act on what he believed to be true but did the opposite and denied Jesus, we must come to no other conclusion but that he did not exercise true faith but a kind of faith that proved false. This is abstract faith. It is faith without works.

The only kind of faith that is genuine is the faith that acts. That's what James is saying. I define true faith as *active faith*. Only active faith is biblical. This is what the Apostle James teaches in his epistle. True faith always works, in other words, it always produces corresponding actions. You call yourself a Christian, that means you have ordered your life around Jesus' teachings. You are not a Christian because you have joined a church, been baptized, signed a decision card, or prayed a prayer. So many people in our churches have done just that and that's all they've done. They believe it to be true. They exercise a kind of faith but it isn't real, it will not uphold them in the final day of judgment. It will have deceived them.

Faith always makes you say or do something because faith is active and not passive. It doesn't remain in the head. The activity it produces is obedience to the Word of God. You live and behave in a manner that conforms to the law of Christ.

Once again James warns his readers not to be hearers of the Word only but doers. To hear the Word of God and mentally agree with it is not faith. I don't care how much you believe this Book. If you don't do what this Book says, James says your faith is dead. Most people sitting in churches like this would argue that if you believe something to be true that is enough to qualify it as faith. If you believe something to be true, that's what faith is. It's thinking you believe in something when in truth you really don't.

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22)

Thinking you believe something when you don't do it is not faith.

James also argues that if you hear the Word of God and do not act out what you hear, you will forget what you heard and lose it altogether.

"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was." (James 1:23-24)

Let me give a very timely and real example. We all would say that the Bible teaches that Jesus is the Great Shepherd, the Pastor of the church. We would also confess that He will help our church in this time of transition. In many ways, nothing is really changing. You have two pastors now and you're going to have two pastors when I'm not here. But that is beside the point. The question is this: do you believe that Jesus is capable of leading Oak Grove? That's the question. Do you believe Jesus is capable of leading our church? The telling question is this: are you acting like He is capable of leading our church through these exciting days? Are you acting like it? I don't care what you say. Are you acting like He's capable? If you're worried, anxious, you get panicky every now and then, thinking we need to do this or we need to do that, we need to take matters into our own hands, then your faith is not real but it's an abstract faith.

You say you have faith in God. Very well, then let me ask you, how is your faith being demonstrated in your actions?

Let's try another example. If you have an unsaved loved one and I ask you, "Are you believing God to save them?" Your answer I'm sure would be, "Yes I am." Well, then, is God saving them as we speak? And you reply, "No, but I believe He can save them." My response is, that is not faith, at least not the kind of faith that honors God. It is not the kind of faith the Bible says we are to exercise toward God. It has the first two components of faith, an object—God—and I know enough that He can save them, He's not willing that any should perish, but that is all. Sometimes this faith even has the third component, it might have some degree of confidence or certainty that He would do so, but without commitment—action—there is no faith. Are you acting like God is saving them presently? Are you talking, speaking, and thinking as if they didn't have any choice, they're going to be saved because they are being saved? Until you get to that point, you're not exercising faith. You're exercising a form of hope but not faith.

This is confusing, I know. It's confusing because we use the word *faith* differently. We talk about having faith in someone or something, but we need to be more specific. What we're saying is we have a certain degree of confidence that that person or thing is trustworthy, but that doesn't mean you are trusting them for anything particular. We just think they're trustworthy. But we still call that faith. No wonder we're confused. We use the word so inappropriately.

We use the word *faith* to mean a system of beliefs like *the Christian faith*. In this use of the word, we mean the message of Christianity and its dogma, its doctrine. "I'm a firm believer in the Christian faith."

We also use the word *faith* to express our belief that some concept, fact, or idea is true or not true. We say, "I believe in God," or "I believe in global warming," or "I don't believe in global warming." Or, "I believe that Jesus is bodily coming back one day." That's what we call faith, we agree with some piece of information.

But what was last week's text? The demons know information about God. They know He exists—they saw Him. They saw their Creator, they worshipped Him in His presence. They believe the fact that God exists but they don't have the faith to serve and love Him.

Another way we use the word *faith* or *believe*, is to discuss our core principles of reality. Our *core beliefs* are the things we trust to be true that goes deeper than intellectual agreement; it actually determines your reality, how you view the world. Your core beliefs determine reality for you and how you live. You will always live according to the way you view reality. This was in the first message. A person who is legally insane is a danger to themselves and others because they live according to their perception of reality, which isn't real, but to them it is. Often times they jump off of buildings or do bodily harm to themselves or others because maybe in their realm they believe they also have the power to raise them up after they have committed the act of murder. They live in a perception but to them it's not just a perception, it's real. You can only live according to what you believe is real. You're not going to live a pretend life. You will not knowingly live and order your life based upon to things you know are not true.

This is one of the reasons for the science of apologetics. How can we know that those first apostles believed? Because they died. You don't die for something you believe to be a lie. They lived according to their understanding of reality, just like you do.

Our core beliefs are our perception of what's real and for that reason we interact with that perception. Our perception of the world orders our lives accordingly. That is what the Bible calls faith. It's deeper than what's in your mind, it's goes into your soul and actually into your body, which I hope to address in a future message. Faith is not just something in the spirit, it's also something of the body and it shapes the way you live.

While it may be true to say, you have faith that God can save your unconverted loved one, you are not exercising the kind of faith that God responds to that saves him or her.

I've spent 20 minutes of your time trying to get us up to date but here's the question in which I want to spend the rest of our time. How does my understanding help to increase my faith? How does faith grow? How can I know what my responsibility is when it comes to growing my faith?

These are some of the most important questions we can ask and therefore it is imperative we have the correct answers. Let's spend the rest of our time talking about how to increase our faith.

I. The Increasing of Faith

A. The Wrong Approach to Increasing Faith.

Most believers try to increase their faith by trying to increase their feeling of confidence or certainty, the third building block. But the problem with that is you cannot generate confidence by willpower. You cannot by your effort, by willpower, increase your feelings of certainty of con-

confidence in God. The will doesn't work this way. The will does not have the ability to increase thoughts, feelings, emotions, at all. The will can only do one thing: make a decision and act on it. That's all the will was designed to do. Stronger resolve, "I'm going to put myself to work to get my mind feeling more confident in God," never works. It's just a psychological trick that does not produce results.

Another false way to increase faith is to confess, profess things into reality. Here the Word of Faith movement is terribly wrong. They get the cart before the horse. They believe that if they can get a sense of this certainty, be psychologically persuaded that they feel their faith and they confess it with their mouths, then whatever they say has to become reality.

Please listen. There is a seed of truth to that. The Bible talks a lot about the power of the tongue and Jesus said if you say to the mountain or the mulberry tree, "Be cast into the sea," it shall be done because whatever things you pray and confess you will receive. Therefore, confession has something to do with faith but where the Word of Faith movement has missed it is they have put confession before faith. They believe that by their confession they bring something into reality, when the truth is, you confess something to be true because faith has worked in your heart to make you know it to be true. Confession is the result of believing it to be true. Confession doesn't produce faith, faith produces the confession. Confession flows out of faith, but faith never flows out of the confession. Speaking works cannot make something real, but faith brings the reality of something in the heart into material existence.

These are inaccurate, unbiblical ways of increasing faith and they do not work. You can play mind games with yourself trying to increase your faith by saying things like, "If I just focus on Christ more, if I just believed that He can do this..." Friends, that won't work. Faith is not increased by increasing mental effort.

B. The Biblical Method of Increasing Faith.

There are two components.

First, you must increase understanding of the object of faith.

As I said last week, I believe this is the main reason why, for us in this room, our faith is often weak. It's because we really don't know our God. We think we do. We know certain facts about Him but we really don't know Him. What we do know is often inaccurate.

For example, most of us struggle with a view of God that says God is harsh, judgmental, strict, austere, severe. We see Him as a miser, that He's stingy, and doesn't give freely. While, intellectually, we know none of those things are true, we should remember that Peter believed he would never deny the Lord Jesus. But he was wrong, wasn't he? Just because you hold it true in the mind, doesn't mean it's true in your reality, your core beliefs.

Most of us, in our core beliefs, view God as a relationship between a debtor and lender. I have to do certain things that obligate God to bless me. If I don't do those things or if I do certain things that He's not happy with, then I can't pray in faith at all. That is totally unscriptural. That is not the God of the Bible. How do you reconcile that view of God that if you just pray hard enough, fast long enough, that you can somehow unwrap His tight fist around what you're seeking and He will relinquish it with what is said in 2 Corinthians 9:8?

"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Tell me, is that the same kind of God that most of us in our core believe? God is so gracious and so good that He wants to give me everything I need to an abundance to glorify Him and fulfill His will. God doesn't just meet my needs, that is a false concept. You might say, "Well, that's what Philippians says, 'My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory,'" but He's never, ever just met my needs. Never. He's always done what Paul says to the Ephesians, exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think. That's not prosperity doctrine, that's Bible doctrine, but because we don't see God in that light it's difficult. That's correct, that's why your faith will remain shallow.

One of my favorite verses that tells me something about what God is, is Romans 8:32. I love this verse.

"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

That's the kind of Father we have. He's generous. He gives liberally. He will not criticize when I come and ask of Him. He says, "Let your requests be made known to Me in everything." He's not going to criticize you because you ask for that thing. Don't discourage your children at Christmastime when they pray for a puppy. I know you don't want the puppy. You know better. But don't discourage their faith. If they want to pray for a puppy, let them pray for a puppy. God may say no, but don't you discourage their faith. You teach them to pray about everything their little hearts desire because the Bible teaches that when you pray, whatsoever things you desire, if you believe, you shall receive them.

That doesn't mean I always get exactly what I want, but I always get an answer. Believe that our heavenly Father is good. Paul continues:

"Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us."

Do you not hear love flowing through all of these words, though he does not use the word *love*? But in the next verse he cannot keep himself from it.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: “For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:32-39)

That’s the kind of God I have and that’s an accurate view of Him.

Jesus elevated our position from servanthood and slavery to friendship.

“No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:15)

In other words, “I’ve held nothing back. I’ve put you on equal footing with Me.” That’s the kind of God you serve. Not this God up here and you down here as a servant who can’t get anything right and have to jump through the hoops to even get God’s heart be inclined to you. Friends, that’s not biblical, yet for so many of us that’s what we have in our core.

I am servant of the Lord but I am a friend that chooses to serve. I have to increase my understanding of who God really is and the more I understand Him and how good He is to me, my confidence will rise.

There’s another component because you can believe theologically correctly about God and still not exercise faith. You have to do one more thing if you want your faith to increase.

2. Increase experience with the object of faith.

You’re going to have to increase the experience that you have with the object, in this case, Christ.

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord,” (2 Peter 1:2)

Who doesn’t want more grace or peace? God’s grace is God’s activity doing for me what I cannot do for myself. Who doesn’t want more of that? I want more of that. How about more peace? He says this is how you get it—through the knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord. We’re back to knowledge but not just facts or information or learning more about Him. It really means knowledge by experience, interaction with Him.

Here’s how your faith will increase. The more you come to understand biblically who God is in the person of Jesus Christ, the more you understand and then commit yourself in experience

with Him, the more your faith will increase. The more you increase your experience with the facts that you learn about Jesus, you are experiencing Jesus.

The facts about Jesus aren't simply intellectual knowledge and information, it's facts about a person. The more I engage those facts the more I'm engaging the person. The more I'm experiencing Him in my everyday reality, the more I find I can trust Him.

Let's go back to our chair illustration from last week. Here's a wooden stool that I will use a material representation of the act of faith.

Last week, I said that faith, whether it was in God or in a chair, it operates in the same way. It does exactly the same. It has the same components. Faith in God requires grace because we don't naturally trust in God, but once God's grace—by His Spirit—is working in my heart, and I am now His child, faith will work exactly the same way as having confidence in this chair.

Now I have an object of faith. I'm going to think about putting my trust in this chair. I'm weary, I'm tired, I want to recline and rest, and I see this chair. That's my object.

Before I can exercise faith in the chair I've got to have some knowledge about it. I can gain knowledge about chairs through the testimony of others. You can tell me how wonderful this chair is and that it will no doubt hold me up or I can gain information and knowledge on my own by my experience with other chairs. When I come to this chair, I say, "You know, this looks like any other chair or stool I've sat on." My knowledge tells me it should hold me up.

This leads to confidence. I have some degree of certainty that if I was to sit on this chair, it would hold me up. But now I'm standing here looking at this chair hoping it will hold me up. But it will not hold me up, with all my weight, unless I do what? Sit on it. I've got to commit.

Faith always has an element of hope in it. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for..." You can have a hope without faith, that's called wishing. "I hope so..." meaning you wish it to be true. But you can never have faith without hope. Faith always has an element of hope. Thus, I'm standing here at this chair and I hope it can hold me up but I'm not exercising faith until I do what? Take the action of trusting it, committing myself to it. Now I'm reclining.

This is how faith always works. All four of those components have to be involved.

The question is, which of these three things, 1) standing hoping the chair will hold me, 2) taking the physical action of sitting in the chair, 3) or resting in the chair, is the kind of faith James is talking about? I know resting is not it. That's not faith. Some of you thought it was, didn't you? You thought this was faith. No, this is knowledge. I don't need faith now that I am seated. I know it's going to hold me up. There's no hoping that it will hold me up. As I am seated, I don't have faith, I have perfect knowledge.

Where am I getting this? The Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:24, “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?”

Why am I trusting this chair will hold me up when it is doing it? You say, “Well, there’s an element of faith in that you need to continue to keep trusting because at some point it could crack.” It’s not going to crack. It’s not going to happen. I don’t have any faith right now, because I know this chair will hold me up. Paul is saying that if you possess it in your hand you don’t need faith.

What is faith? “The substance of things hoped for, the evidence, (the proof) of things not seen.” What that means is that God has put into my core the reality of a truth, something that I am believing God to bring to pass. I don’t possess it at this moment in the material realm, but I have a hope that I will possess it in my hand because I possess it in my heart right now. That is faith. The thing hoped for and not seen is real to me and that’s why I can act like it’s mine. Faith acts because it sees reality.

The first step of faith, which is standing before the chair hoping, if not professing, “I believe this chair can hold me up,” is also not faith because I can stand there all day long believing it will hold me up but until I take the act of faith and sit down, it’s not holding me up.

Professions of faith are little, they are not in themselves faith, and they don’t produce faith. That’s what James was trying to say in our text last week. I can say to a destitute brother or sister, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled.” I can stand there and do that all day long but as James says, “[if] you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” James says that is a dead faith.

Thus, faith is saying and doing, hoping and acting.

Knowledge is insufficient by itself; it must be accompanied by experience.

Let me give you an illustration. If you remember, two weeks ago I said because my reality about gravity is so engrained in me, I don’t jump out of planes without a parachute. I also said I don’t jump out of planes, even with a parachute. My understanding of gravity is a core belief. But let us suppose, I wanted to take up the hobby of skydiving. What would I need to do?

First, I would need to find someone who is experienced and licensed in skydiving to teach and supervise me to skydive. Because of the person I am, I would get references and do research on the instructors because I don’t want some twenty-something who is moonlighting by teaching skydiving. I want to know this man is worthy of my confidence. I need some knowledge about him.

I’m sure the instructor’s teaching would involve reading, learning, and studying the sport of skydiving. I must learn some things about it. And once I demonstrated to my instructor a proficiency in knowledge of the sport, he would take me up and we would jump. He would say, “Don’t worry,

I'm going to be with you." Let me ask you, if this were you, how would you be feeling at this moment? You've never jumped out of an airplane before. You've studied it, you've learned, but you've never done it. Do you think your blood pressure and heart rate would increase? Would you have a sense of anxiety? Butterflies? Maybe a panic attack or two?

But you're attached to the instructor so you're going to jump. But because of your confidence in the skydiving instructor, you are willing to commit. The next week you do it again and the next week. For several weeks, you jump with your skydiver. How do you feel now? Does your heart rate increase? Maybe, but now it's not with fear but with excitement of the thrill you're about to experience. Do you have panic attacks? Not anymore because you have, by the act of the will, committed yourself to experience that your faith is rewarded. By experience you discover that your commitment worked, and with that, your feelings of certainty increase.

After a few weeks, eventually, the skydiving instructor tells me that it was time to jump out of the plane solo. We get up there and it's time for me to jump. How do you think I would feel? My heart rate is back up; my blood pressure has increased because I've never experienced skydiving by myself. I have an object of faith, I have knowledge, I have a certain degree of confidence, maybe not 100 percent, but I'm reasonably sure that if I jump out of the plane everything will go well. Therefore, I jump. I commit.

I do that week after week after week and now I'm no longer thinking about it. It's normal. Why? Because my confidence increase as your experience increases. If you want your faith in Jesus to increase, you're going to have to think about what's true about Him. You must learn Him the way this Book talks about Him, not the way you learned in church or the way somebody else taught you about Him, but through the inspiration and illumination of the Spirit. Get to know Him and, then you need to increase your commitment of stepping out of the boat.

Here's how you do that. You need to find yourself a promise. Go through this Book and find a way you need God to come through for you. There are hundreds of promises God has made to you in this Book. I know you can't believe God for all of them today, but there's at least one or two promises in this book you can believe and start committing yourself to, that means acting like it's true because it is true. But here's the qualification that must be adhered to if faith is to increase and that is you must not be able by your own power bring the promise to pass. If you can do it, then you don't need a promise. It must be a situation that if God doesn't come through for you you're going to fail. If God doesn't come through, it is certain failure; it's got to be that kind of promise. This is where you begin, by acting according to what you believe to be true. It's a choice of the will. You choose to trust, just like you chose to sit down and rest in a chair.

I need to bring this to a conclusion. Let's go back to the text. Your feelings of confidence will increase as your experience of Jesus increases. James doesn't say it that way. He says it implicitly with an illustration.

*“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?”
(James 2:21)*

James goes back to this father of faith, Abraham, an example of a man living by faith in God. Interestingly, James chooses only one of example of Abraham faith, commits himself to act because he believes what God says is real. Out of all the ways Abraham acted in faith, James chose the last one that we know about, which was one of the greatest tests of Abraham’s life. It was when God came to him and commanded him to take his son and sacrifice him. That means to kill him, drain his blood, and burn his body as a sacrifice to God. And Abraham obeys. There’s no record of an argument. There’s no record of resistance. He simply obeyed.

That’s a great illustration, but honestly, that doesn’t really help me a whole lot. If God comes to me and asks me to kill one of my children as a sacrifice—my faith is not there to obey. I couldn’t do that. God knows my heart. I couldn’t do that. If it would have been me choosing illustrations from Abraham’s life of faith, I would have used the illustration of when God first gave a directive to Abraham. If I were writing the Epistle of James, this is the story I would have used. It is an amazing story of faith, and it’s more relatable to me.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.” (Hebrews 11:8)

To me, that’s an incredible story. I think that’s a great illustration of commitment. He’s has an object, knowledge of the object, a certain degree of certainty, and action.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Abraham to tell his family that he was leaving? Can you imagine going to your family and saying, “A God, I don’t know His name, spoke to me today and said I’m supposed to leave.”

“Who is this God, son?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ve got many gods here and they won’t tell you to do that.”

“This God did. I think He’s the God of that air and the sea and the earth. I don’t know much about Him but He’s told me to do it.”

“Where are you going, son?”

“I don’t know.”

“How will you know when you get there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Which direction are you going to start?”

“I don’t know.”

Do you think Abraham might have felt a little foolish? I think he felt considerably foolish. But that’s where he started and he obeyed. He acted upon what little knowledge he had of this God who had spoken to him.

The next test of faith, Abraham doesn’t do as well. Abraham is in the Promised Land but there’s a famine. What do you do when there’s a famine? You take your family where there’s no famine. In this case, Abraham went to Egypt. While in Egypt, Abraham lies and says that Sarai is not his wife is only his half-sister. That was half true. She was his half-sister but because it wasn’t the whole truth it wasn’t the truth. He had a faith failure.

A few years later, God speaks to him and says, “You’re going to have a son.” He goes home and says to Sarah, “God told me we were going to have a son.”

“Come on,” Sarah argues, “you know I can’t have children. But, here’s my Egyptian mistress, the one we got while we were in Egypt. She can be my surrogate and the child who is born will be ours.”

Again, Abraham had a faith failure. He couldn’t believe God would give Sarah a child. But a few years later, God comes back to him and said, “You and Sarah are going to have a son.” How did Abraham and Sarah respond? They laughed. “God, I’m 100 years old and she’s 90. Our bodies are practically dead.” But he acted. Abraham and Sarah acted on God’s word and a child was conceived. She did not immaculately conceive like Mary. Abraham knew Sarah and a child was born. Abraham has learned through his acts of faith and, yes, even through his faith failures about the faithfulness of God. Thus, Abraham’s faith was increasing.

Finally, after several more years had passed, we come to the story James writes about. Why does James use this? I think verse 22 tells us.

*“Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?”
(James 2:22)*

You would think it would take great faith to leave your homeland and you’re right but James is saying that was not mature faith. We see in the life of Abraham that it wasn’t because he had several faith failures thereafter. But by the time God tells him to take his late teenage son and offer him as a sacrifice, Abraham’s faith had matured and grown to the point that He could tell him to do that and he obeyed, even believing that if God required this of him God would raise Isaac from the dead.

I think this is the reason why James uses this event in the life of Abraham. By using it, James shows the process of Abraham's faith and its culmination. His faith had grown with his experience. But his faith wouldn't have grown had he not acted upon what God said. James was stating implicitly to his reader that if you want to have a mature faith, you must start where you are and act upon what God has said. You must let your smaller experiences of God coming through for you leading you to greater experiences.

Mature faith is faith that is unnoticed in the person exercising it. They don't notice it because it is normal for them to do so. They don't say, "Oh, look at me. I did something in faith today!" They don't do that because it's a way of life for them. It becomes normal.

For most of us, faith is a great struggle because we are trying to act like we have faith when the truth is we don't. The only way you're going to have it is to take God at His word and be willing to appear like a fool. He's never going to ask you to do something that you can reasonably, normally do. Never. Amen.