

Faith Is Not Wishing

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Theology



To celebrate Stand to Reason’s 30th anniversary, we’ll be republishing classic issues of Solid Ground that represent some of the foundational ideas characterizing our work over the decades—ideas that continue to be vital to apologetics and evangelism today.

I don’t like the word “faith.”

It’s not that faith isn’t valuable. True biblical faith is essential for salvation. But faith is often deeply misunderstood in a way that hurts Christianity and harms Christians.

Some think that having a level of certainty about the truth of Christianity makes “belief” unnecessary or irrelevant. That kind of knowledge undermines genuine faith and offends God.

The reasoning goes something like this. We all know God wants us to have faith. In fact, without faith, it’s impossible to please him (Hebrews 11:6). However, gathering evidence for God and Christianity leaves little room for faith. After all, how can one have faith in

something he knows is true? Faith, then, is opposed to knowledge. Therefore, apologetics undermines the faith project and thus displeases the Lord.

On this view, faith is believing the unbelievable, clinging to your convictions when all the evidence is against you. Faith is a “leap,” a blind, desperate lunge in the darkness. When doubts or troubles beset us, we’re told to “just have faith,” as if we could squeeze out spiritual hope by intense acts of sheer will.

This view of faith reduces Christian conviction to religious wishful thinking. We can hope, but we can never know.

But this will never work. Someone once said, “The heart cannot believe that which the mind rejects.” If you are not confident the message of Scripture is actually true, you can’t believe it even if you tried.

The “I just take Christianity on (blind) faith” attitude can’t be the right approach. It leaves the Bible without defense, yet Peter directs us to *make* a defense for the hope that is in us.[1]

Also, the biblical word for faith, *pistis*, doesn’t mean wishing. It means active trust. And trust cannot be conjured up or manufactured. It must be earned. You can’t exercise the kind of faith the Bible has in mind unless you’re reasonably sure that some particular things are true.

In fact, I suggest you completely ban the phrase “leap of faith” from your vocabulary. Biblical faith is based on knowledge, not wishing or blind leaps. Knowledge builds confidence, and confidence leads to trust. The kind of faith God is interested in is not wishing. It’s trust based on knowing, a sure confidence grounded in evidence.

The following biblical examples make my point.

Blood, Boils, Frogs, and Flies

Israel’s exodus from Egypt was depicted in a clever animated film called *The Prince of Egypt*. After seeing the movie, my wife and I spent time reading the original account in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Though I’d read this passage a number of times, something jumped out at me then that I hadn’t seen before, a phrase God kept repeating over and over in the account.

The material relevant to my point starts in Exodus 3. Reading the encounter with God at the burning bush, we realize Moses is reluctant to be God’s deliverer. And it’s understandable. Why would Pharaoh, the most powerful leader in the world, submit to a renegade Jew? Why would two million Hebrew slaves follow a murderer and a defector?

“What if they won’t believe me or listen to me?” Moses demurred. “What if they say, ‘The Lord hasn’t appeared to you?’”

What God *didn’t* say in response is as important as what he *did* say. He didn’t say, “Tell Pharaoh he’s just going to have to take this on blind faith. Tell the Hebrews the same thing. They’ve got to have faith.”

Instead, God asked, “What’s that in your hand?”

“A staff,” Moses answered.

“Throw it on the ground.”

So he threw it down, and it became a serpent.

“Stretch out your hand,” the Lord said. “Grab it by the tail.”

Reluctantly, Moses did as he was told. When he grabbed the snake, it became a staff again.

“Do this,” God said, “and then they’ll believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, has appeared to you.”

More signs followed that got the people’s attention: the river of blood; frogs covering the land; the gnats, flies, and locusts; the boils and pestilence; the hail; the darkness; and finally, the angel of death. All for one purpose: “That they might *know* there is a God in Israel.” Not simply “believe,” “hope,” or “wish.” *Know*. This is no idle comment, but a message that is central to the account. In fact, the phrase is repeated no less than ten times throughout the account.[2]

What was the result? “And when Israel *saw* the great power which the Lord had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord, and they *believed* in the Lord and in His servant Moses” (Exodus 14:31).

Note the pattern: a powerful *evidence* (miracles, in this case), giving the people *knowledge* of God, in whom they then placed their active trust (faith). Knowledge—some level of certainty—went before belief in each of these cases.

God didn’t ask the Hebrews, or even Moses, for mindless faith, blind leaps, or wishful thinking. He demonstrated his power, giving them good reason to believe, resulting in obedience. First, the Hebrews were given good reason to know. This then grounded their investment of faith (active trust) in God. Pharaoh got the picture, too, but his response was not humble surrender leading to salvation. Instead, it was submission under compulsion. In both cases, though, each was compelled to act based on the unmistakable evidence of God’s power.

In the animated feature *The Prince of Egypt*, Miriam breaks into a song of praise following Israel's deliverance. The song is titled "When You Believe" and includes these words: "There can be miracles, when you believe.... Who knows what miracles you can achieve, when you believe.... Just believe.... Gotta believe...."

Is that the way it happened, that the people achieved miracles *because of* their belief? No, reality was just the opposite. In the original account, miracles didn't *follow* belief; they *preceded* it. Acts of power led to knowledge, which then allowed faith to flourish.

Taking the Easy Way Out?

Fast forward to the New Testament, and you'll find the same pattern in the life of Christ. In Mark 2, we encounter Jesus speaking to a group gathered in a home in Capernaum. A crowd blocks the front door, keeping a paralytic—being carried by his four friends—from gaining an audience with the Healer. The only way in is from above, so they dig through the earthen roof and lower the deformed man down on a pallet.

Jesus is impressed. Seeing their faith, he says to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." His words offend the scribes, though, who grumble among themselves at such an audacious claim. "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" they whisper.

Jesus, aware of their complaint, puts a question to them. "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Arise, and take up your pallet and walk'?"

How would you respond? If you were in Jesus' position, would it be easier for you to claim to forgive sins or to claim to heal paralysis? Clearly, it's always easier to boast about something no one can check up on than it is to claim to have supernatural powers and run the risk you'll fail the test.

Jesus knew it looked like he was taking the easy way out, until his next remark: "But in order that you may *know* that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then turned to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." Then, in the sight of everyone, the paralytic got up and got out.

Jesus gives us the same lesson we find in Exodus. He proves something that can't be seen—the forgiveness of sins—with evidence that can be seen—a dramatic supernatural healing. Jesus heals "in order that you may know." Once again, the concrete *evidence* allows the doubters to *know* the truth so they can then *trust* in the forgiveness Christ could give. Once again, there is no conflict between knowledge and faith. Rather, the first is the basis for the second.

The Apostle Peter

In the book of Acts, Peter’s dramatic sermon on Pentecost gives us another vivid example of the evidence/knowledge/faith equation.

The crowd is both amazed and bewildered at the manifestations of the Spirit they see with their own eyes. Peter takes his stand before the throng and explains that it isn’t intoxication they witness, but prophecy being fulfilled in their midst by the hand of God.

He recounts that Jesus—one attested to by miracles, signs, and wonders—had been murdered at the hands of godless men. Death couldn’t hold him in the grave, though. He had risen. Not only did King David himself foretell such a thing; Peter and the rest of the disciples had witnessed the risen Christ themselves. The Holy Spirit, the gift promised by the Father, was now being poured out in a way that Peter’s entire audience could “see and hear.”

He then closes with a statement tailor-made for all those who think that certainty somehow diminishes genuine faith: “Therefore let all the house of Israel *know for certain* that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”[3]

When the crowd beholds the evidence—the miracles, the fulfilled prophecy, the witnesses of the resurrection, the powerful manifestations of the Spirit in their midst—the people are pierced to the heart. They are *convinced* of their error, they *know* the truth, and thousands *believe*, putting their *trust* in the Savior.

Hear, See, Handle, Believe

John, the Beloved Disciple, brings it all together for us in 1 John. He opens his letter with the evidence of his own eyewitness encounter with Christ. Notice how many senses he appeals to:

What was from the beginning, what we have *heard*, what we have *seen* with our eyes, what we *beheld* and our hands *handled*, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was *manifested*, and we have *seen* and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was *manifested* to us—what we have *seen* and *heard* we proclaim to you also....

Then he closes his letter like this:

And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may *know* that you have eternal life.[4]

To John, faith wasn't a blind leap. It wasn't wishing on a star. It was grounded in evidence that led to knowledge. And when the evidence is so overwhelming—as it was for the earliest followers of Jesus (and many since then)—the knowledge is certain.

The record is clear from the Old Testament to the Gospels, from the very beginnings of the early church to the epistles of the apostles: Biblical faith isn't wishing; it's confidence. It's not denying reality, but discovering reality. It's a sense of certainty grounded in evidence that Christianity is true—not just “true for me,” but actually, fully, and completely true.

Spiritual growth involves increasing our knowledge *and* our certainty of God. So there are two things here: first knowledge, and second confidence in what we know.

How do we increase confidence? Wish harder? Hope against hope? Stop our ears to the sounds of the critics without, and ignore the doubts of the agnostic within? This will never work, because confidence cannot be fabricated. It must be earned. As you gather substantiating evidence, your confidence grows automatically and your faith is deepened.

Faith is not about wishing, but about confidence, and the facts make the difference. You get a hold of the facts, you study, you learn—even a little—and you'll realize you're not just wishing on a star about eternal things. You'll realize Christianity is really true.

And that changes everything.

[1] 1 Peter 3:15.

[2] Cf., Exodus 6:7, 7:5, 7:17, 8:10, 8:22, 9:14, 9:29, 10:2, 14:4, and 14:18.

[3] Acts 2:36, the New American Standard Bible, 1977 (and throughout).

[4] 1 John 5:11–13.