

## Faith and Reason

Christianity teaches us that it is impossible to please God without faith.<sup>1</sup> What is this God-pleasing quality called faith? In one sense, Christian faith is accepting as true the doctrines of Christianity. This was C. S. Lewis' (1898-1964) initial definition when he addressed faith in two separate chapters of his *Mere Christianity*. Unlike many who attempt to deal more fully with living by faith, Lewis tied faith to reason. He suggested that biblical faith does not come into play by accepting Christianity when one's best reasoning concludes that the weight of evidence is against Christianity; rather, only when our reasoning concludes that the weight of evidence supports it.

Lewis reminded us that there would be many times when the reasoned faith of Christianity would become inconvenient: if Christianity were not true, we might escape some of its requisites. For example, a lie may be less embarrassing to share than the truth; a shady deal may become lucrative, or a lust acted upon may be pleasurable. No new reasons against Christianity have arisen here; rather, these thoughts and experiences carry out an attack upon the known truths of Christianity. Lewis then famously suggested that "faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods."<sup>2</sup>

Such faith was beautifully illustrated to young children in a recent Christian elementary school chapel. A strong, highly-respected teacher asked young Robert to help him illustrate faith. Standing on a one-foot riser, Robert trusted his teacher by blindly falling backwards into his capable arms. After each such exercise of Robert's faith in his teacher from an incrementally higher perch, he was asked, "Robert, was I faithful?" When the BIG test came, and he was asked to do the same from a substantial height, Robert reasoned that his teacher had been so capable and so trustworthy that he could again trust him even from this height to fall blindly backwards into his arms. Notice the difference between sight and reason. While Robert could not see where he was falling, he had good reason to trust his teacher. In doing so, he helped illustrate to everyone in the chapel what Lewis was really teaching about reasoned faith.

Some might suggest that Robert's faith was non-rational -- why should he risk harm by falling backwards? -- but this view misses the meaning behind biblical faith. Faith is not seeing; but it is rational. The object of Robert's faith was not the task; it was his teacher. Robert had learned to know and trust him in his classes; thus, these on-stage experiences only lent further strength to his trust. While the BIG test was genuinely scary, he exercised his reasoned faith in his teacher and found him faithful yet again.

This illustration is not unlike what we learn about Abraham's faith. Reading the narrative of Abraham's life starting from Genesis 12, we see how he, too, learned to know and trust the person of God. He had one-on-one dialogue with God; he witnessed supernatural protection and blessing, and he found the object of his faith so capable and faithful that he had substantial reasons to further trust Him. When God told Abraham that he would have his long-awaited son by Sarah, even though they were past childbearing years, Abraham believed God-- specifically reminded that nothing is too hard for God.

Here again, some might suggest that his blind faith was non-rational - post-menopausal women do not have babies in the natural order of things. But, the object of Abraham's faith was not in the natural order of things, but rather in the God who created the natural order of things and who could at

will work supernaturally. Abraham's reasoned faith became reality when Sarah conceived, and when a year later, he saw and held his son of promise.

As we know, even this test was not Abraham's BIG one. While the promises made to him about innumerable descendants were rooted entirely in Isaac, Abraham was asked to sacrifice this son of promise. Could this possibly have been reasoned faith? Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) used this same story of Abraham's BIG test to forward to us, and to the world, a notion of a faith divorced from reason. Kierkegaard, the father of all existentialism, argues that Abraham's faith was a non-rational existential leap of faith and, indeed, the opposite of reasoned faith. Alas, while Kierkegaard's enduring influence upon even Christians has become so pervasive that many equate faith with a non-rational leap, we should read our Bibles more carefully than did Kierkegaard. Notice how the New Testament commentary on this BIG test shows Abraham's reasoned faith: *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and, in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.*<sup>3</sup>

While Abraham's faith, like all faith, was blind (*what we do not see*<sup>4</sup>), it was not divorced from reason. In fact, if it had been a non-rational leap, the value of Abraham's faith would have only been diminished. Rather, his faith serves as a meaningful example to us precisely because he did not throw away reason. God was the object of Abraham's reasoned faith. He had witnessed repeated faithfulness in even more substantial ways than Robert had with his teacher. Abraham's trust grew stronger over time as he too could answer the question, "Abraham, was I faithful?" More than depending upon "sight" and beyond embracing the "natural order of things," Abraham had reasons to place his faith in God. In the end, the object of his faith proved faithful again even in the BIG test.

If Christianity is true, the narrative of Abraham's life of faith is not only true, but it is also instructive to each of us. Biblical faith is not existentialism's version of a false dichotomy between faith and reason; rather, it is a reasoned faith in the trustworthy person of our God. The God-pleasing discourse about faith is alive and well in the Christian school, but alas, it could never be discussed within the walls of our common schools so dominated by imposed secularism. If Christianity is true, we need the influence of its truth-claims and moral underpinnings in both our lives and in the lives of our children. Perhaps you are a Christian who is experiencing a lesser test that will serve to build further your trust in Him-- you will find Him faithful. Perhaps you are experiencing your own BIG test-- you will find the object of your faith wholly trustworthy. Moreover, through the growth your own tests bring, you can teach your beloved children and others that they, too, will find Him just as faithful in their God-pleasing lives of faith.

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1 Hebrews 11:6

2 Lewis C. S. (1980). *Mere Christianity*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, p.125.

3 Hebrews 11:17

4 Hebrews 11:1