

How Can I Live by Faith?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

How Can I Live by Faith?

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Chapter One

The Faithful God

The Christian faith is a reasonable faith. When we speak of “the Christian faith,” in one sense, we mean the body of teachings that has been passed down by the prophets and Apostles and set authoritatively in sacred Scripture (Jude 3). But we also mean the center of a life based on that body of teaching, for at the center of the Christian life is faith. The essential meaning of faith is trust. To believe is to trust something or someone. This means that our personal reliance, what we hold on to, what

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we base our life on, is based on trusting something. Trust in God, faith in Christ alone for salvation, is at the center of the Christian religion, and it is a key part of the Christian life to learn how to live out that trust in a life of faith.

Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, faith as a virtue has come under assault. The guns of intellectual criticism have been trained on our faith as the self-anointed intellectuals have positioned faith as utterly opposed to rationality, as inherently irrational. As a result, many Christians have retreated from the arena of debate. Not only that, they've gone further and concluded that rationality and reason are tools of Satan that contradict the truth of Christ.

The pernicious influence of Enlightenment-era rationality has even worked its way into the church. The theological liberalism of the nineteenth century brought an assault against the basic foundational views of the Christian faith. This theological movement progressed into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to basic unbelief and has taken hold of many church institutions. Some Christian parents have even found that upon sending their children off to ostensibly Christian colleges and universities, their children come back filled with doubts and

skepticism propagated by the very professors the church had entrusted to teach and explain the faith.

In our day, thanks to the influence of the Enlightenment and the attacks of theological liberalism, many people see a sharp divorce between faith and reason. In fact, we are living in the most anti-intellectual period in the history of the Christian church. What noted biblical archaeologist William Foxwell Albright called “a baleful influence of existential philosophy” has permeated not only secular culture but also Christian culture so much that we have now become suspicious of reason. As a result, many people today believe that rationality and intellect have little to do with religion or faith. Some feel uncomfortable even talking about categories of logic because they have been steeped in the idea that Christianity is to be embraced by faith and not by reason.

The reaction against this tendency was to move away from intellectualism under the dual false assumptions that intellectualism leads to unbelief and that Christians must live by faith and not by reason. As a result, the concept of faith that has emerged is often prefaced by the word *blind*. How many times have you heard people say that we must accept something by faith? Perhaps you’ve said something

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similar. But what if someone responded by asking, “*Why* should I take it by faith?” In other words, should we ask people to believe by blind faith for no reason whatsoever except our own personal assertion? Isn’t blind faith nothing more than asking someone to believe something simply because we said so? And if that’s the case, why should anyone believe us over someone else?

As believers, we owe people answers to these questions. When we seek to give answers, we find ourselves engaged in apologetics. If we proclaim the message of the gospel of Christ, warn people that their ultimate destiny depends on their response to His claims, and then tell them to simply take it on blind faith, we do violence to God the Father, who is the fountainhead of all truth. We do violence to God the Son, who is the incarnation of truth. And we do violence to God the Holy Ghost, who is the Spirit of truth.

If I trust someone who is not trustworthy, that’s superstition and foolishness. So the basic answer of the apologist, when asked why someone should trust God, is because God is trustworthy. Of course, we must also demonstrate to people that God is trustworthy. To be a Christian is to live by trusting God with our life and our death. Why do we do that?

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To answer that question, we'll look to my favorite chapter in the whole Bible—Genesis 15. Verses 1 and 2 say: “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’”

To set the context for the story, Abraham has been called out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and he is apprehensive. He's experiencing a crisis of faith with the little bit of faith that he possesses. In this moment, God comes to him and says, “Fear not.” The Christian life is a life of faith, and a life of faith means a life of trust. There's no commandment given by God that is more difficult to obey than this one.

This command occurs about a hundred times more than the second most repeated command. When God calls people, He says, “Fear not.” When angels appear, they say, “Fear not.” When Jesus appears, He often says, “Fear not.” Why is this? Do you think that perhaps He knows something about us? Perhaps the greatest danger to the Christian church is the paralysis that comes from fear.

When God appears to Abraham, the first thing He says is “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield.” An existentialist,

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who believes that life is meaningless and the ultimate destiny is absolute annihilation in the pit of nonbeing, would say that we ought not to fear but instead ought to be authentic, courageous people who take life by the horns. Fear not; life is meaningless, he would say. But that line of thinking is insane.

God's reasoning is very different. When God says "Fear not," the reason not to be afraid follows: because "I am your shield." During His earthly ministry, Jesus put it this way: "But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The existentialist would say, "Be of good cheer; the world will overcome you." When God calls Abraham to respond with faith, He gives him a reason that makes sense—because "I am your shield." If God is our shield, would it be reasonable or unreasonable to be paralyzed by fear? If we knew God was shielding us, what would that do to our fear? We could do anything if we really believed that God was our shield.

Then, God goes further by saying, "Your reward shall be very great" (Gen. 15:1). Abraham must have wondered at this statement, for at this point, he was childless, and in ancient Near Eastern culture, having a son to take the inheritance was crucial. He voices this concern when he

says, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” and “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir” (vv. 2–3).

Abraham is asking God what He could possibly give him to compensate for the fact that he has no son. The Lord responds: “‘This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.’ And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (vv. 4–5).

Have you ever tried to number the stars? In this passage in Genesis, Abraham is outside his tent on a starry night gazing up at the Milky Way galaxy, brilliant and clear. Amid billions of stars, Abraham looks up and attempts to count them. God tells Abraham that not only would he have an heir, but that his heirs would be as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sand of the sea. And in verses 6–7 we read: “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. And he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.’”

Right after God pronounced Abraham justified by

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faith, Abraham—this father of the faithful—says, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” (v. 8). We might expect God to lose patience with Abraham at this point. Had He not just said He would give Abraham an heir? God is immutably, eternally truthful. The Lord God has no shadow of turning in Him. He does not break His promises. He does whatever He says He will do. But God recognizes that Abraham is struggling to live by faith and trust that God would do what He said He would do. So He answers Abraham’s question by giving him an unforgettable experience.

He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in

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a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” (vv. 9–16)

And then, the verse of all verses: “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces” (v. 17). It’s possible to read this verse a thousand times and still miss what’s happening. What is described in this verse provides the historical basis for why a Christian can live by faith.

In the Old Testament, the expression for when a covenant was instituted between people was to say the covenant was *cut* rather than *made*. This expression was illustrated vividly in the rite of circumcision (Gen. 17), where Abraham and his household and descendants were commanded to cut off the foreskins of their flesh as a way of marking themselves as God’s people, as those who were in covenant with Him.

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This rite had a symbolic meaning with both a positive and negative element. The positive meaning symbolized being cut off from the wickedness and evil of the world and being consecrated unto God, just as the skin had been cut off. The negative element was this: the recipient of circumcision was saying to God in graphic terms that if he didn't obey the terms of the covenant, he would be cut off from God's presence and all the benefits that flow from being in relationship with Him. He would be cut out and cast into outer darkness from the kingdom of God and His beloved Son, just as he had cut off the foreskin of his flesh. That was dramatic.

In Genesis 15:17, we read of the circumcision not of Abraham but of God. God instructed Abraham to get the animals, cut them in half, and lay them out with half on one side and half on the other. Then, a horrible darkness fell on Abraham. In the midst of this darkness, he saw "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch." He saw this fire burning and flickering and flaming, and then the flame began to move through the pieces.

What was the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch? Or perhaps more accurately, *who* was the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch? What we have in verse 17 is a

theophany—a visible manifestation of the invisible God, who often appeared in the Old Testament embodied visibly in the mode of fire. The burning bush, the pillar of fire, the consuming fire, is God Himself (see Ex. 3:2; 13:21; Lev. 10:2). What Abraham saw was God passing through these pieces. God was saying this to Abraham: “If there’s one promise to you and to your seed that I fail to keep, may I, the Lord God Omnipotent, be as these animals. May My divine being be cut in half. May the immutable God suffer mutation. May the indivisible God be divided. May the infinite God be fragmented.” That’s what God was saying.

On that day, God said to Abraham—and to all who would come after Abraham—that He keeps His promises, and He swore by the integrity of His own being. Have you ever taken an oath? As children, we say, “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” Or perhaps we swear on another’s grave. We say crazy things to emphasize to people that they can trust us, that we will keep our promises. Or perhaps as adults, we’ve sworn in a courtroom with our hand on the Bible vowing to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

Blind faith? God forbid. Our God is utterly trustworthy. People will risk their possessions, their reputations,

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and perhaps even their lives for us. But God risks His eternal being. He has pledged His eternal being; all that He is and all that He has, He has put on the line as a surety for His promise. To not believe Him is irrational.

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Is faith a blind leap?

Becoming a Christian doesn't come at the cost of your intellect. In fact, the Christian faith provides the most compelling, logical explanation for life in this world.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul demonstrates that Christianity is rational because it is based on the promises of God, who has proven His trustworthiness in His Word. These promises provide an unshakable foundation for our salvation, faithful living, and hope for the future.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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