

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 2

Responding to God with faith

The previous article highlighted two qualities of God—his greatness and his goodness. God always uses his enormous power to further his promise of love and grace toward his people. He is gentle, loving, slow to anger and full of mercy.

Here, we want to focus on the “so what” question. How is this relevant to us? What difference does it make in our lives? How do

we respond to a God who is simultaneously powerful and gentle? We respond in at least two ways. In this chapter, we’ll look at trust; in the next chapter we’ll discuss worship.

Trust

When we realize that God has all power to do anything he wants, and that he always uses it for the good of humanity, then we can have absolute confidence that we are in good hands. He has both the ability and the stated purpose of working all things, including even our rebellion, hatred and betrayal against him and one another, toward our salvation. He is completely trustworthy—worthy of our trust.

When we are in the midst of trials, sickness, suffering and even dying, we can be confident that God is still with us, that he cares for us, that he has everything under control. It may not look like it, and we certainly do not feel in control, but we can be confident that God isn’t caught off guard. He can and does redeem any situation, any misfortune, for our good.

We need never doubt God’s love for us. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). The God who did



not spare his own Son can be counted on to give us through his Son everything we need for eternal happiness.

God did not send somebody else: The Son of God, essential to the Godhead, became human so that he could die for us and rise again for us (Hebrews 2:14). We were redeemed not by the blood of animals, not by the blood of a very good man, but by the blood

of the God who became human. Every time we take communion, we are reminded of the extent of his love for us. We can be confident that he loves us. He has earned our trust.

“God is faithful,” Paul tells us. “He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (1 Corinthians 10:13). “The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one” (2 Thessalonians 3:3). Even “if we are faithless, he will remain faithful” (2 Timothy 2:13). He is not going to change his mind about wanting us, about calling us, about being merciful to us. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23).

He has made a commitment to us, a covenant with us, to redeem us, to give us eternal life, to love us forever. He will not be without us. He is trustworthy, but how do we respond to him? Do we worry? Do we struggle to be worthy of his love? Or do we trust him?

We need never doubt God’s power, either. This is shown in the resurrection of Jesus from death. This is the God who has power over death itself, power over all the beings he created, power over all other powers (Colossians 2:15). He triumphed over all things through the cross, and this is demonstrated through his resurrection. Death could not hold him, for he is the author of life (Acts 3:15).

The same power that raised Jesus from death will also give immortal life to us (Romans 8:11). We can trust that he has the power, and the desire, to fulfill all his promises toward us. We can trust him with everything—and that’s a good thing, since it is foolish to trust in anything else. Of ourselves, we will fail. Left to itself, even the sun will fail. Our only hope is in a God who has power greater than the sun, greater than the universe, more faithful than time and space, full of love and faithfulness toward us. We have that sure hope in Jesus our Savior.

Belief and trust

All who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved (Acts 16:31). But what does it mean to *believe* in Jesus Christ? Even the devil believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He doesn’t like it, but he knows it’s true. Moreover, the devil knows that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

So what is the difference between our belief and the devil’s belief? James gives us an answer: True faith is shown by action (James 2:18-19). What we do shows what we really believe. Behavior *can* be evidence of faith, even though some people obey for wrong reasons. Even the devil operates within constraints imposed by God. He doesn’t like to, but he does.

So what is faith, and how does it differ from belief?

The simplest explanation is that saving faith is *trust*. We trust God to take care of us, to do good for us rather than evil, to give us eternal life. Trust means knowing that God exists, knowing that he is good, knowing that he has the power to do what he wants, and trusting that he will use it to do whatever is best for us. Trust means a willingness to put ourselves under him, to be willing to obey not out of fear but out of love. When we trust God, we love him.

Trust is shown by what we do. But the action is not the trust, and it does not create the trust—it is only the result of trust. True faith is, at its core, trust in Jesus Christ.

A gift of God

Where does this kind of trust come from? It is not something we can work up for ourselves. We cannot talk ourselves into it or use human logic to build an airtight case. We will never have the time to cover all the possible objections, all the philosophical arguments about God. But we are forced to make a choice

Five facts to know about faith

1. God loved us even when we were his enemies; he will be faithful in all circumstances.
2. The resurrection of Jesus shows that God has the power to save us even from death.
3. When we trust God, we obey him, knowing that his commands are for our good.
4. No one has perfect faith; we grow in faith through life experiences.
5. Doubts and questions can lead us to trust Christ even with the unknown.

each day: Will we trust God, or not? Trying to delay the decision is a decision in itself: We do not yet trust him.

Each Christian has at some point or another made a decision to trust in Christ. For some, it was a well-thought-out decision. For others, it was an illogical decision, made for wrong reasons—but the right decision anyway. We could trust no one else, not even ourselves. On our own, we would mess our lives up. Nor could we trust other human authorities. For some of us, faith was a choice of desperation—we had nowhere else to go but to Christ (John 6:68).

It is normal that our first faith is an immature faith—a good start, but not a good place to stay. We need to *grow* in our faith. As one man said to Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). The disciples themselves, even after worshipping the resurrected Jesus, had some doubts (Matthew 28:17).

So where does faith come from? It is a gift of God. Ephesians 2:8 tells us that salvation is a gift of God, which means that the faith that leads to salvation must also be his gift. In Acts 15:9 we are told that God purified the believers’ hearts by faith. God was working in their hearts. He is the one who “opened the door of faith” (Acts 14:27). God did it, because he is the one who enables whatever faith we have.

We would not trust God unless God himself gave us the ability to trust him. Humans have been too corrupted by sin to believe or trust in God on our own

strength or wisdom. That is why faith is not a “work” that qualifies us for salvation. We get no credit for meeting the qualification—faith is merely receiving the gift, being thankful for the gift. God gives us the ability to receive his gift, to enjoy his gift.

Trustworthy

God has good reason to give us faith, for there is someone completely trustworthy for us to believe in and be saved by. The faith he gives us is rooted in his Son, who became flesh for our salvation. We have good reason to have faith, for we have a Savior who has purchased our salvation for us. He has done all that it takes, once for all, signed, sealed and being delivered. Our faith has a firm foundation: Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2)—but he does not work alone. Jesus does only what the Father wants, and he works by the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Holy Spirit teaches us, convicts us, and gives us faith (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:10).

Through the word

How does God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) give us faith? It is usually through the preached word. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The message is in the written word, the Bible, and it is in the spoken word, whether a sermon at church or a simple testimony of one person to another.

The word of the gospel tells us about Jesus, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit uses this word to enlighten us, and somehow allows us to trust ourselves to this word. This is sometimes called “the witness of the Holy Spirit,” but it is not like a courtroom witness we can ask questions of.

It is more like an internal switch inside us that is flipped, allowing us to accept the good news that is preached. It feels right; though we may still have questions, we believe that we can live in this message. We can base our lives on it, we can make decisions based on it. It makes sense. It is the best possible choice.

God gives us the ability to trust him. He also gives us the ability to grow in faith. The down payment of faith is a seed that grows. It prepares and enables our minds and our emotions to understand more and more of the gospel. It helps us understand more about God

as he reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ. To use an Old Testament metaphor, we begin to walk with God. We live in him, think in him, and believe in him.

Doubts

But most Christians struggle with faith at some time or another. Our growth is not always smooth and steady—it comes through trials and questions. For some, doubts come because of a tragedy or severe suffering. For others, it is prosperity or good times that subtly tempt us to rely on material things instead of God. Many of us will face both sorts of challenges to our faith.

Poor people often have stronger faith than rich people do. People beset by constant trials often know they have no hope except God, no choice but to trust him. Statistics show that poor people give a higher percentage of their income to the church than rich people do. It appears that their faith (even though not perfect) is more consistent.

The greatest enemy of faith, it seems, is when all goes well. People are tempted to think that it was by their strength or their intelligence that they achieved as much as they have. They lose their sense of child-like dependence on God. They rely on what they have, rather than on God.

Poor people are in a better position to learn that life on this planet is full of questions, and God is the least questionable thing they have. They trust in him because all else has proven itself to be untrustworthy. Money, health, and friends are all fickle. We cannot depend on them.

Only God is dependable, but even so, we don’t always have the evidence we would like. So we have to trust him. As Job said, even though he kills me, I will trust him (Job 13:15). Only he offers the hope of eternal life. Only he offers a hope that life makes any sense or has any purpose.

Part of growth

But still, we sometimes wrestle with doubts. That is simply part of the process of growing in faith, of learning to trust God with yet more of life. We face the choices set before us and once again choose God as the best choice.

As Blaise Pascal said centuries ago, if we believe for no other reason, then at least we ought to believe because God is the best bet. If we follow him and he does not exist, then we have lost nothing. But if we do not follow him and he does exist, we have lost

everything. So we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by believing in God, by living and thinking that he is the surest reality in the universe.

This does not mean that we will understand everything. No, we will never understand everything. Faith means trusting in God even though we do not always understand. We can worship him even when we have doubts (Matthew 28:17). Salvation is not an intelligence contest. The faith that saves does not come from philosophical arguments that answer every doubt. Faith comes from God. If we rely on having answers to every question, we are not relying on God.

The only reason we can be in God's kingdom is by grace, through faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ. If we rely on our obedience, or anything else that we do, then we are relying on the wrong thing, an unreliable thing. We need to re-form our faith (allowing God to re-form our faith) into Christ, and him alone. Works, even good works, cannot be the basis of our salvation. Obedience, even to the commands of Jesus, cannot be our source of assurance. Only Christ is trustworthy.

As we grow in spiritual maturity, we often become more aware of our own sins, and our own sinfulness. We realize how far we are from Christ, and this can lead us to doubts, too, that God would really send his Son to die for people as perverse as we are.

The doubt, no matter how real, should lead us back to greater faith in Christ, for only in him do we have any chance at all. There is no other place to go. In his words and his actions, we see that he knew quite well

how perverse we were before he came to die for us. The better we see ourselves, the more we see the need to cast ourselves into the mercy of God. Only he is good enough to save us from ourselves, and only he will save us from our doubts.

Fellowship

It is by faith that we have a fruitful relationship with God. It is by faith that we pray, by faith that we worship, by faith that we hear his words in sermons and fellowship. Faith enables us to have fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is by faith that we are enabled to give our allegiance to God, through our Savior Jesus Christ, by means of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts.

It is by faith that we can love other people. Faith frees us from the fear of ridicule and rejection. We can love others without worrying about what they will do to us, because we trust in Christ to reward us generously. Through faith in God, we can be generous with others.

Through faith in God, we can put him first in our lives. When we believe God is as good as he says he is, then we will treasure him above all else, and be willing to make the sacrifices that he asks of us. We will trust him, and it is by that trust that we will experience the joys of salvation. Christian life is, from first to last, a matter of trusting God.

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Questions for Discussion

1. Which is most reassuring to you: God's love or his power?
2. Does God love us even when we rebel against him?
3. How was your faith immature when you first believed? How have you grown?
4. Do you find that Scripture strengthens your faith?
5. Has prosperity weakened your faith?
6. Do you tend to trust something else—money, government, or friends?