

Faith and Doubt

Was anyone really surprised when the letters of Mother Theresa came to light, exposing posthumously her struggle to believe? If you have not struggled with doubt, it may be that your faith is not strong enough.

When I was younger, there was a popular saying among those my age: “don’t trust anyone over thirty”. Having already discovered the elusiveness of certainty, I had my own motto: “don’t trust anyone who is sure.” It’s one that I still go by.

But if certainty is not to be found, what does that say about faith? Do we need faith? Unequivocally, the Bible tells us that we do, for “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Some of us (and I count myself among them) crave certainty so much that we become obsessed with “making sure”. It is good to be reasonably sure. It is wise to base your decisions on probable outcomes. But certainty is not needed, nor can it ever be achieved.

Some have the idea that any time we believe something that cannot be proven, we are foolish and gullible. But that is not the picture of faith that the Bible gives us. “Blind faith” would indeed be foolish, but it is neither commanded nor commended in the Bible. Reasoned faith, on the other hand, comes highly recommended.

The idea that faith is blind, or that love is blind, contradicts the wisdom of the Bible. “He who does not love is blind...and cannot see afar off” (2 Peter 1:9). Far from blinding us, love gives us sight, or rather, insight. Faith is like that too.

Abraham, who is held up as a great example of the Old Testament faithful, believed God (Romans 4:3). Did he have proof? No. To God alone belongs certainty. But neither was his faith without substance. Abraham, of all the Old Testament figures, is called “the Friend of God” (James 2:23). Love, friendship, faith. None of these are blind. Yet all entail uncertainty.

Though certainty may be out of reach, reason isn’t. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). It’s not just a wish. It has substance. It comes with evidence. Faith comes, not by ignorance, but “by hearing – and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17).

Knowledge does not lead us away from faith, though what is “falsely called knowledge” (1 Timothy 6) can. True knowledge will nourish our faith.

But doesn’t knowledge lead to certainty? And if certainty excludes faith, how can knowledge lead to faith?

The relationship between faith and doubt is similar to that between courage and fear. If you have no fear, you don’t need courage. Courage is needed only when there is something to be afraid

of. Likewise, we don't need faith when there is no possibility of doubt. Faith and courage enable us to go beyond our weaknesses; to act in spite of fear, to believe in spite of doubt.

Certainty for us is a future prospect. For now, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (I Corinthians 5:7). But there will be a time when no faith is required. When Christ appears to confirm the words of God once for all, then we too will be certain, and faith will be a thing of the past. For "Now we see in a glass darkly, but then face to face" (I Corinthians 13:12).

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