



#3 “What exactly is ‘faith’ anyway?”

To consider that ‘faith’ is simply trusting the promises of God (from Romans 4:18-25).

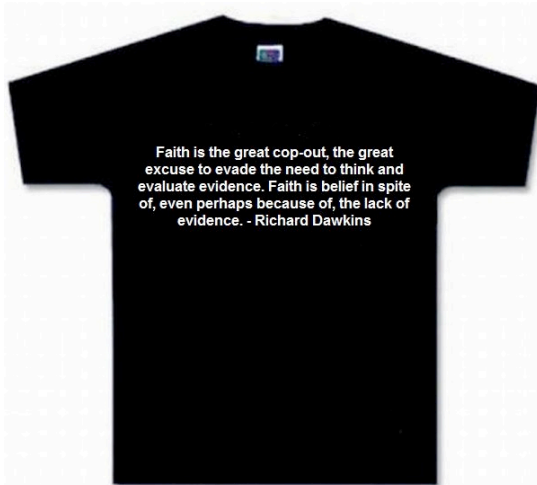
Writes one ‘agnostic’ on the Richard Dawkins website¹:

What do Atheists believe in?

Hi everyone. I've only recently called myself an atheist, although I might be more agnostic. A friend of mine, who is Christian, asked me **what I have faith in or believe in as an atheist**. I answered that **I don't believe faith is a necessary source of hope and breeds irrational thinking**. I said I believe in rational thinking and using that to seek truth.

Anyways, I was wondering what you much more experienced atheists would answer to this and if you think my response is justified or not. I am currently a senior at a Christian high school. I've gone to a Christian school all my life but I just could not stomach the ignorance and hypocrisy found among the religion, so I broke away from it. However, I'm not calling myself an atheist out of spite. After years of growing up with the Christian religion and researching many other religions out there, I've come to the natural conclusion that is atheism. Seeking truth is my motivation for becoming an atheist.

And other atheists put on their t-shirts²:



¹ <http://richarddawkins.net/discussions/484202-what-do-atheists-have-faith-believe-in>

² www.atheisttshirts.co.uk

Q1. How do agnostics/atheists understand what 'faith' is?

• *Agnostics/atheists understand faith effectively as a 'leap in the dark' – believing something where there is no evidence or evidence to the contrary. They see faith as something that is irrational and therefore not to be trusted.*

"Romans" is a letter in the latter half of the Bible. It is believed to have been written around 60's AD, by the Apostle Paul, to the young church in Rome (hence the name). Paul wanted to encourage the church by explaining the "gospel" to them. The key sentence of the letter is this: **"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." [Romans 1:16]**³

The word "gospel" just means good news. The good news is to do with salvation – with being saved from God's anger at humanity. It's a solution that God himself provides in the sacrifice of his son Jesus (see session 1 on Romans 1:18-32, and session 2 on Romans 3:21-26).

It's a solution that requires trust – or 'faith' as a response. Paul next goes on to talk about Abraham, who lived about 1800BC. Paul picked on Abraham as a case study because his is one of the Jewish Patriarchs. Paul wants to show that it's always been about trusting the promises God makes – even before Jesus himself appeared on the scene.

Romans 4:18-25

18Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." **19**Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. **20**Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, **21**being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. **22**This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." **23**The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, **24**but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. **25**He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Note that in session 2 we learnt that the same root word gives rise to the words translated as 'righteousness', 'justified', 'just' and 'justice'. 'Righteousness' was something God provided. In the sacrifice of his Son, atonement or satisfaction was made for the wrongdoing of humanity. Those who trusted in this sacrifice were no longer under God's anger for their wrongdoing.

Q2. When was Abraham declared righteous?

• *Abraham was declared righteous when he believed God's promise that he would have the blessing of being the father of many nations. He trusted that God would keep this promise even though he and his wife were very old/beyond the childbearing years.*

If we go back to the original story....

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Genesis 15:1-6 – probably written by Moses, around 1300BC (writing about events that occurred around 1800BC)

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram [Abraham's former name] in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." 2 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

4 Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." 5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 17:10-17

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

¹⁷ Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-12, 15-18

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about. "....

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son. "....

¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Q3. Was Abraham's faith blind or irrational?

• Abraham believed God when God made him the promise – while he was still childless. However that didn't mean he didn't have moments when he wavered. He laughed when God told him he would actually have a child, because even he could see the absurdity of the situation. It's not as if faith here has no place for questioning.

• *And also there was evidence to place that trust in. God had provided the child in the first place – so Abraham worked out that somehow God could still make him the father of many nations even if he sacrificed his only son. Belief – or trust – or faith (same words) is not in the face of no evidence at all, or evidence to the contrary. Abraham took God at his word when he made the promise but then his dealings with God strengthened his beliefs so that he didn't ultimately give up on God. Even when God first made the promise in Genesis 15 (repeated from Genesis 12) Abraham would still have had a history of dealings with God to rely on.*

Q4. Was Abraham's faith perfect?

• *It's interesting that Abraham's laugh (and other moments of weakness) aren't held against him (Paul wrote that Abraham "did not waver through unbelief" (Romans 4:20)). This is because the key factor is not the amount of faith a person has, but the faithfulness of the one who has made the promises (God).*

Q5. 'The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us...' (Romans 4:23-24). In what sense were they written for us?

• *They were written to show that when it comes to relationship with God and receiving his blessing, it has always been first and foremost about trusting the promises that God makes. It's never been about keeping the rules. (Abraham lived 400 years before the Law/10 commandments came about!). That doesn't mean that obedience has no part. Obedience flows out of faith. That's why Abraham was prepared to sacrifice in son. On other words, our actions show us where our beliefs lie.*

• *What promise are we called to trust in? The one Paul has on view here is in Romans 4:24-25. For us, trusting the promises of God is trusting that Jesus' sacrifice was enough to pay for our wrongdoing (Romans 4:24-25). How do we know that? Because Jesus was 'raised to life for our justification' (Romans 4:25). If Jesus was still dead, we wouldn't know whether his death was sufficient to pay for our wrongdoing.*

Written by Caroline Spencer of City Bible Forum. 2012.

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