

IS FAITH IRRATIONAL?

SERIES: *SENT: LIVING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.*



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Acts 25–26

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On trial

Listen to three of the so-called “new atheists” opine about faith:

“Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is the belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”¹

“Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible.”²

“Faith is the surrender of the mind; it’s the surrender of reason, it’s the surrender of the only thing that makes us different from other mammals.”³

Well, I guess we can all go home now!

Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens agree: faith is irrational. Many people in our world agree. Are they right? The apostle Paul was accused of being irrational for believing in Jesus. In fact, he was even accused of being out of his mind. Let’s read what he has to say in response in Acts 26.

Paul has managed to turn his defense, first before Jewish authorities and then before Roman authorities, into a referendum on the resurrection of the dead—that is, the future resurrection of God’s people that is anticipated by the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul languished in prison in Caesarea for two years until the Jews who opposed him sensed an opportunity to press their case against him when Festus succeeded Felix as the Roman governor of Judea. Festus agreed to hear the case, and when Paul makes his defense in Acts 26, Agrippa, the Jewish king, is also present. Paul addresses Agrippa and arrives at the heart of the matter in verse 6.

Acts 26:6-8:

And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

The theme of these verses, quite clearly, is “hope.” Paul uses the word no less than three times in three sentences, twice as a noun and once as a verb. Paul sees himself as being accused of and standing trial for, having hope. Many of his fellow Jews, in fact, share his hope, at least in a general way: they nurture such hope as they “earnestly worship night and day.”

What then does hope have to do with the accusations against Paul? And why in the world would you put someone on trial for having hope?

Paul’s hope is “in the promise made by God” to the patriarchs of Israel—that is, the promise to raise his people from the dead: “Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” Although many Jews believed that promise, no one expected God to raise one individual from the dead before he raised all his people from the dead. Paul elsewhere likens the resurrection of Christ to “the firstfruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). Just as the first part of the harvest portends the full harvest, the resurrection of Christ portends the final resurrection of God’s people.

Most Jews who believed in the final resurrection from the dead did not share Paul’s belief that Jesus was the first of more to come. In fact, many of those Jews, especially the nationalists, would have a particular problem with the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead because his vision of the kingdom of God was far too inclusive for them.

Faith gives hope

We humans have a hard time with death. Mostly, we don't want to die, and we don't want our loved ones to die. Filmmaker Woody Allen, cracks, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying." Moreover, we want to believe that life continues in some form beyond the grave. One could argue, as some do, that we humans are guilty of wishful thinking and that we just have to face reality: we're going die, and hope for life beyond death is irrational.

Nevertheless, hope in life beyond death is strangely persistent, even among skeptics. It's common to attend a funeral or a memorial service during which people profess the belief that the deceased is "in a better place" or is "looking down on us" even if that person had no faith to speak of.

Steve Jobs, knowing he would die soon, told his biographer:

*"For most of my life, I've felt that there must be more to our existence than meets the eye. I like to think that something survives after you die. It's strange to think that you accumulate all this experience, and maybe a little wisdom, and it just goes away. So I really want to believe that something survives, that maybe your consciousness endures."*⁴

When I was a boy, I watched a television show called *The Immortal*, which featured a character whose blood chemistry kept him from aging, which also kept him on the run from several rich old men who wanted to use him for their personal blood bank so that they too would stop aging.

Now, according to many "transhumanists," the day is coming in the not-too-distant future when we will be able to transcend death, not through blood chemistry but through technology. Such transhumanists believe in "singularity," the supposed moment when computing power reaches an "intelligence explosion," making life expectancy limitless. Even so, it's questionable whether such a life could even be called "human." In fact, such transhumanists say we will be "post-human," merging with technology and undergoing a radical transformation.

I'm quite sure that's not what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and

we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). What he meant, of course, was that when Christ returns, whether we're dead or alive, our bodies will be transformed into eternal, physical bodies that will not be subject to decay.

People really, really want to live forever and see their loved ones live forever. The hope for eternal life will not die, even in post-Christian America. Could it be that we were created with a desire to live forever? Could it be that death was not part of his original plan? Could it be that he defeated death in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that all who believe in Christ will be resurrected from the dead?

Could it be that the most rational explanation for the human hope to live forever is that God intended us to do so and made provision for us to do so through the Lord Jesus Christ? I think so.

In Acts 26:9-13, Paul tells his story up the point when he encountered the risen Jesus when he was journeying with others to Damascus to persecute followers of Jesus.

Appointed as a witness

Acts 26:14-18:

And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Before he met Jesus, Paul was kicking against the goads—that is, prods with sharp pricks attached to them—like an animal that was fighting against its owner's purpose for it and hurting itself in the process. Jesus had a "purpose" for appearing to Paul, and by commissioning Paul, Jesus gave him a purpose. First, Paul was to be a servant—a servant of the Lord, a high

calling indeed. As a servant of the Lord, he was to serve others. Specifically, Paul was to serve the Lord and serve others by being a “witness” to what he sees of Jesus. The fulfillment of his purpose hasn’t been without difficulty: it has required Jesus to deliver him from both Jewish and Gentile enemies.

Jesus has sent Paul as a servant and a witness in order to “open eyes,” especially the eyes of Gentiles. Metaphorically, people who don’t believe that God has revealed himself in the person of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, can’t see. Jesus sends Paul to help them see what he has seen. Jesus commissioned Paul to call people, especially Gentiles, to turn from the darkness to the light: to repent and believe, to forsake false gods and to embrace the true God, who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

If people repent and believe, they will “receive,” not earn, “forgiveness of sins” as a gift from God. More importantly, having been forgiven, they will receive “a place among those who are sanctified” by allegiance to Christ. The word translated “place” is related to the word translated “inheritance.” The Israelites’ inheritance was the land of Palestine. In the New Testament, the land expands to become the whole earth—that is the new and eternal earth (Matthew 5:5, Romans 4:13). Those who give their allegiance to Christ are “sanctified”—they are forgiven and set apart—to assume their place in the new earth.

Paul’s Jewish opponents would have a particular problem with his statement that Jesus has sent him, a Jew, to the Gentiles; that Gentiles were to be included in the people of God; and that they were to be included simply on the basis of allegiance to Jesus (Acts 22:21-22).

However, the Lord called Israel, as the servant of the Lord, to do precisely what Paul is doing, according to the prophet Isaiah:

“I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.”
(Isaiah 42:6-7)

Of course, Israel failed in its vocation as a light for the nations, and its vocation was assumed by its Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Servant of the Lord. Simeon, the old man who held Jesus in his arms when he was a child, proclaimed him to be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 3:32). Jesus now passes on his vocation as the Servant of the Lord to his people, servants of the Lord, including Paul.

Faith gives purpose

Just as humans want to believe in life beyond death, they also want to believe that their lives have purpose. However, just as some argue that humans who believe in life beyond death are guilty of wishful thinking, some have the courage of their anti-faith convictions and contend that life is meaningless.

Among those was British writer Somerset Maugham: “If death ends all . . . I must ask myself what I am here for, and how in these circumstances I must conduct myself. Now the answer is plain, but so unpalatable that most men will not face it. There is no meaning for life, and life has no meaning.”

If there is no God and there is no resurrection of the dead, he’s right, of course. Why get so worked up about things if we’re all just a product of an evolutionary accident? Nevertheless, just as the hope for life beyond death will not die, the belief that life has meaning is strangely persistent, especially in the Silicon Valley. People want to make a difference. They want to believe they’re making a difference. They even want to change the world.

Many of them, though, believe the world is here by accident, that humans came into existence by random chance, and that the universe and everything in it will end in “heat death,” according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. If so, then life has no meaning. Whatever difference you make doesn’t matter in the end. Change the world if you like, but the world will die. To try to make the world a better place when you believe that the world is going to die strikes me as slightly irrational . . . that is, unless Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, that means that his followers will also rise from the dead; that means the Second Law of Thermodynamics will be overturned; that means the world, and even the universe, will be remade, for there will be “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). All this means that what we do here

matters, that it lasts, that it makes a difference, not just for a few years or even for ten thousand years, which counts for nothing, but forever, which counts for everything.

Paul concludes 1 Corinthians 15, his great chapter on the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of God's people, with these words: "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." If you are a believer in Christ, then your labor is not in vain, and if it is not in vain, then it has purpose—eternal purpose.

Abraham was called, Israel was called, Jesus was called, Paul was called, and finally we are called to be "a light for the nations" by praying, by loving, and by speaking. We are connected to a purpose that began some four thousand years ago and spills over into eternity. Talk about having a purpose!

Could it be that the most rational explanation for the belief in human purpose, even by those whose worldview, if their honest, would defy such purpose, is that God implanted within us the belief that our lives could have some purpose? I think so.

In Acts 26:19-23, Paul tells Agrippa what happened after he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus: he preached about the death and resurrection of Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles, urging them to repent and believe, which caused some Jews to seize him.

Out of his mind?

Acts 26:24-26:

And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind." 25 But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.

Festus, the Roman governor, can sit in the background no longer. Paul's defense, especially his claim that Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead and has appeared to him, has pushed Festus over the edge. He accuses Paul of being "out of your mind," which is actually one word in Luke's narrative (*mania*), related, quite obviously, to the English word "mania."

Paul claims that the words of his defense are "true": the risen Jesus actually appeared to him and commissioned him. He also says his words are "rational": they are based on what he actually experienced.

How do you know whether someone who tells you something that's hard to believe is true or not? Indeed, some people *are* out of their minds. Other people lie or stretch the truth. If Paul were the only one who believed that Jesus had risen from the dead, his words may have been suspect. But he's not the only one. So Paul at this point addresses "the king"—that is, Agrippa.

Festus had interrupted when Paul was saying "these things," but Paul knows that Agrippa is aware of "these things"—that is, the things concerning the resurrection of Jesus. Up to this point in Acts, other people have also claimed, based on their encounters with the risen Jesus, that he is the Jewish Messiah, and many other people have believed them. Such claims have not been made, and such a following has not been generated, "in a corner" so that Agrippa, king of the Jews, would not be aware of them.

Faith is rational

Whereas Paul was accused of being irrational because his great learning had supposedly driven him out of his mind, believers today are more likely to be accused of being irrational because lack of great learning has made them susceptible to being deceived. Surely, this line of reasoning goes, most learned people in the twenty-first century cannot believe that a human being could rise from the dead.

There are many problems with this line of reasoning, not least its fallacious presuppositions, but one of the chief problems is this: how else do you explain events that proceeded immediately from the death of Jesus? And by the way, these things did not happen in a corner; they are open to historical inquiry.

If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, why did people claim that he rose from the dead? What did they stand to gain for making such a claim if in fact he did not rise from the dead? If you're going to make something up and you want people to believe it, why not make something up that's a little more believable?

If you're going to make something up, wouldn't you make something up that was less likely to get you persecuted and quite possibly killed? People will sometimes die for something they believe to be true, but people will rarely die for something they believe, or even know, to be false. As Pascal says, "I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut."⁵

Moreover, why did large numbers of people in the first century believe that Jesus rose from the dead? People stayed dead in the first century, just as they stay dead in the twenty-first century. And why believe in the resurrection if doing so meant risking persecution and quite possibly your life?

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, writes:

*Each year at Easter I get to preach on the Resurrection. In my sermon I always say to my skeptical, secular friends that, even if they can't believe in the resurrection, they should want it to be true. Most of them care deeply about justice for the poor, alleviating hunger and disease, and caring for the environment. Yet many of them believe that the material world was caused by accident and that the world and everything in it will eventually simply burn up in the death of the sun. They find it discouraging that so few people care about justice without realizing that their own worldview undermines any motivation to make the world a better place. Why sacrifice for the needs of others if in the end nothing we do will make any difference? If the resurrection of Jesus happened, however, that means there's infinite hope and reason to pour ourselves out for the needs of the world.*⁶

Could it be that the most rational explanation for belief in the resurrection of Jesus is that he in actuality rose from the dead? I think so.

Everything

Paul writes, again in 1 Corinthians 15:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Corinthians 15:3-7).

Now, what does the resurrection of Christ mean? Everything. Literally. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that everything will be restored and even enhanced, for if you compare Genesis 1-2 to Revelation 21-22, you must conclude that the remade creation will outshine the original creation.

Therefore, you have every reason to hope for a glorious future that even death cannot kill. Therefore, you have every reason to live for a purpose that has an eternal impact.

That is, you have every reason to hope for such a future and live for such a purpose if you have given your allegiance to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And if you haven't yet done so, could it be that you're kicking against the goads? Is there something within you that wants to believe, that wants this kind of hope and purpose? Are you fighting it and maybe hurting yourself in the process?

C.S. Lewis writes, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."⁷

True and rational words.

Endnotes

¹ Dawkins, Richard "The 'Know-nothings,' the 'Know-alls,' and the 'No-contests.'" The Nullifidian. December 1994.

² Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004.

³ Hitchens, Christopher. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009.

⁴ Isaacson, Walter. *Steve Jobs*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011. 570-71.

⁵ Keller, Tim. *The Reason of God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Dutton, 2008. 210.

⁶ Keller. 211-12.

⁷ Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952. Book III, Chapter 10.