

Faith Failure?

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (NIV)

¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. ⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. ¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Have you ever met a Pastafarian? This “religion” is based on a letter written by Bobby Henderson back in 2005 to the Kansas Board of Education as they were debating whether or not to have the intelligent design theory taught alongside evolution in high school. Mr. Henderson wrote that the theory of an intelligent designer was no more valid than the belief that a flying spaghetti monster created the universe, believers of this theory he called “Pastafarians.” It is actually accepted now as an official religion though it was really just a parody of the Christian belief that God created the heavens, the earth, the universe, and everything in them. So, we don’t really have to wonder what Mr. Henderson would think about Hebrews chapter 11, particularly verse 3: “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”

So, how do you respond to someone who tells you that they are a “Pastafarian”? Should we just dismiss them for mocking our faith, the very core of our being? Should we engage them? Should we ignore them and hit the “faith button” and tell Mr. Henderson that you just gotta believe even though you can’t see God? You know, blind faith, right? But if we do that, wouldn’t Mr. Henderson respond right back by telling you or me to hit the “faith button” on the Flying Spaghetti Monster?

The main thought behind Mr. Henderson’s letter to the Kansas Board of Education is to keep them from treating science and faith as the same thing. Evolution you can observe through the scientific method while an invisible, supernatural God or spaghetti monster you cannot. He would say that one is science and the other is not and so we can’t treat them the same, they need to remain separate.

It’s good to recognize what science is: the study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment. Through the observations, hypotheses are formed to make statements of general truths about how things operate. The hypotheses are then tested to see if the observations always hold true, which lead to the creation of theories or explanations of phenomena. Basically, science is tested guesses at what generally happens based on repeated observations.

What happens when you apply the scientific method to what the ancients believed, to their faith? Take Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were promised to own the land God sent them to but, by the time each of them died, they still lived in tents without owning their land, died like foreigners living in a foreign county. Observation: God failed to get them the land. Take God’s promise to Abraham that he was going to have descendants so great that a whole nation would come from him, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sands on the seashore. Yet, by the time he died, he had a total of 8 kids – 1 by Sarah, 1 by Hagar, and 6 by Keturah. Observation: While he did give Abraham some kids, God failed to deliver the amount of kids promised. There was also Sarah, Abraham’s wife. She was promised that she would have a child. Yet year after year came and went and still no child all the way up to 89 years old with a husband who was 99, both of them past the age of having kids. Observation: God failed to give Sarah a kid. Theory: God fails to keep his promises. The people who believe in him are faith failures.

Do you observe the same in your life? God says that the righteous will flourish and the wicked destroyed. Yet, you see the wicked prosper and the righteous perish. Faith failure. God promises to take care of all my needs, but I am consumed with depression and anxiety. I’ve tried reading the Bible and coming to church and trusting more in his promises, but I’m still stuck in that deep dark place unable to break free. Where’s the happiness? Where’s the light? Faith failure. God said he would answer my prayers, but when

I prayed for healing, it never came. Faith failure. God says that he works all things for my good, but when I stand up for him, remain faithful to him, I keep getting knocked down, insulted, ignored. He promised to give me the Holy Spirit to give me the right words to speak at the right time yet I was tongue-tied, I was silent. Nothing came. Faith failure.

What do we do with observed faith failures in our lives? Do we brush them aside, put them on a shelf and not think about them? Do we just hit the faith button and not think about what we observe? Do we have to conclude with the theory that God is a liar and a joke, that he really is no different than Henderson's Flying Spaghetti Monster?

Science and faith are different. Maybe we fail to recognize the role each plays in our lives as believers. If we view faith as a magic potion that will cure all the things that ail us, then we will observe nothing but faith failures. This is what faith is: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (verse 1) Faith is not observation. It's a certainty, a confidence, a trust, of what will happen in the future when we don't see it right now. Faith is actually essential to science. Faith trusts that what is observed is true, that facts are facts, that $2+2=4$, and that the color blue is the color blue. Faith does not ask that we turn our brains off and just believe; faith is trusting the answer because of the source of the answer.

So, what are we putting our faith, our trust, in? Do we put our faith in only what we observe? Have our observations always been correct every single time with no variation and no error? Do we put our faith in what we feel? Have our feelings ever changed, ever led us into a course of action that turned out bad? Do we put our faith in someone who has ever been proven wrong, even if it was just once? What should we put our faith in?

Observe again Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah. Although they themselves did not observe the fulfillment of God's promises to them during their lifetimes, others have and recorded the results for us. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob produced a great nation of people who still exist today. Abraham has genealogies, lists and lists of names recorded of those who came from him, lists that cause our eyes to glaze over as we read them in the Bible but we can read with joy because here is the empirical evidence that God actually kept his promise. "And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." (verse 12) Sarah biologically, naturally, couldn't have kids. Yet, at age 90, she became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. "And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise." (verse 11)

Conclusions? "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth." (verse 13) While people call them faith failures, they were anything but. God came through even though they didn't observe it. This is true time after time with God's promises, as we observe them from the historical record of the Bible. There is not one time where God has promised something and failed to deliver it. Faith in God does not end in failure.

Yet, there are times when we give up on God, when we doubt him when we don't see the righteous prosper and the wicked perish, when we don't see the good he promised during our lives, when we don't see the depression lift, when we don't see the healing happen. God has every right to call us faith failures, but he doesn't. Instead, he has us observe something else recorded in history, something that other people saw and preserved for us. He points us to the cross. There, our shame has been removed by what Jesus did. He didn't turn away from us as if he embarrassed to look at us as faith failures. No, he came and took that shame on himself, the shame that he hung on his shoulders while he hung on the cross. There, Christ, God himself, was also forsaken by God, that God turned his back on him because he carried on himself the sins of the world. He took away our shameful faith failures and trusted that 3 days later he would be vindicated when he was raised back to life, showing that all sins were paid for and wiped out.

With our shame and faith failures removed by what he did, God calls us his children. Jesus calls us his brothers. This is not an obligatory family relationship; this is the relationship bought and paid for by his sacrifice, his blood. He atoned for our faith failures, made us at one with God, covered us with his perfection. By what we observe on the cross, we know that we have a permanent dwelling with God, a city that lasts forever, heaven as our home. Like he was for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah, so also it is for us: "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." (verse 16) Because God is faithful, we are not faith failures.

Science and faith are both good gifts from God. He wants us to observe this world, to take things off the shelf, test them, reflect on them, not just mindlessly believe. He also wants us to observe what he has done, how he has never broken his promises to us, how he has always been faithful to us. This is why our faith trusts what we haven't observed. This is the kind of faith that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah lived by. This is the faith we live by. This is the faith that is commended by God. This is faith that never fails. Amen.