

Does Christian Faith Mean Giving Up on Evidence?

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[0 : 00] Greetings, Braymar Baptist. My name is Randall Rauser, and I'm delighted to be joining you today in this really unique time.

Unfortunately, I've never had an opportunity to visit you in person, so I guess I can tell people that I preach at Braymar Baptist now, even though I'm actually preaching at the seminary, Taylor Seminary, where I teach and where I had the privilege of teaching Pastor Dixon for a few years.

It was wonderful, I should say, getting to know him, and I look forward to connecting with him again when we are allowed actually to have physical contact with other people. But today and next week, I wanted to look at two related topics.

They are topics that have to do with faith or belief and evidence. And I have a lot of interest in Christian apologetics in particular, which refers to the defense of Christian faith and the provision of evidence for one's Christian beliefs.

In 1 Peter 3.15, Peter says, Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that lies within, but do so with gentleness and respect. And I want to devote the next couple weeks of our time together to talking about those issues.

[1 : 16] I want to begin in this sermon by looking at this question. Does Christian faith mean giving up on evidence? Does Christian faith mean giving up on evidence?

Now, as I said, I have an interest in apologetics, and I often interact with people outside the Christian church, sometimes people who are very hostile to the Christian church.

And many of them have a perception of Christianity as being an irrational commitment. One of them I saw about a year ago.

This was on Twitter. Daily Atheism is the Twitter feed. And this fellow from Daily Atheism is retweeting the well-known Christian pastor, Joel Osteen.

And Joel Osteen in this tweet says, The facts may tell you one thing, but God is not limited by the facts.

[2 : 13] Choose faith in spite of the facts. And then as you can see here, Daily Atheism comments on Pastor Osteen's comments and says, Facts are pretty silly anyway.

Now, I suppose you can get the message here. This is an attitude of sarcasm, an attitude of criticism toward Pastor Osteen's comments. I take it that if we had Daily Atheism here to share his opinion, he would say, Well, Joel Osteen is committing a common Christian view where you turn your mind off, you turn your brain off.

You don't worry about facts. You don't worry about evidence. And that's a very common view that I often find among skeptics of Christianity. Here's another example.

This picture here, it says religion. And then it says, first of all, conventional logic. In conventional logic, you say, if you say something like, I have a baseball.

And the other person says, oh, yeah, prove it. Okay, here. Okay, you're right. In other words, in conventional logic, if you make a truth claim, you provide evidence for it.

[3 : 27] And then it says, well, this is religious logic. I have a baseball. Oh, yeah, prove it. You can't prove that I don't. The idea being that if it's a religious or a Christian belief, then to ask for evidence is offensive.

People will be offended if you ask them for evidence for their Christian beliefs. If you ask them for the reason for the hope that lies within, they'll be offended and irritated with you.

This is a very common view, as I've said. It often goes like this. Reason is based on evidence.

But faith, and in particular Christian faith, is based on nothing at all. This is how Bill Maher, the popular atheist and comedian in the United States, put it.

He says, faith means making a virtue out of not thinking. So the idea being that if you are really a good Christian, then you're not going to exercise reason or evidence.

[4 : 32] You'll just exercise faith. Now, there are texts in the Bible that people who have this view of Christianity will go to. And I want to begin our time today by looking at one of those passages.

And then I want to spend our time together to offer a criticism, a critique of this particular reading of this passage. Let's begin with the passage itself.

It is from John chapter 20. It is the time just after Jesus has been raised from the dead. And we have that moment where Thomas, who has come down to us as doubting Thomas, expresses skepticism about the death of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus.

And he wants to see evidence for the claim that Jesus was resurrected. Now, Thomas, also known as Didymus. Didymus means a twin.

So Thomas was a twin. One of the 12 was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord. But he said to them, unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

[5 : 48] A week later, his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, peace be with you.

Then he said to Thomas, put your finger here. See my hands? Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe.

Thomas said to him, my Lord and my God. And then here comes the key moment. Then Jesus told him, because you have seen me, you have believed.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. And so here's the claim. The claim is that this story, this encounter between Thomas and Jesus, just feeds into this whole idea that Christians reject evidence, that they reject facts, that they reject reasoning.

Because Thomas, being a good, skeptical, critical, rational thinker, is looking for evidence to support the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. He's not just going to believe it.

[7 : 00] Jesus comes to him, but then he says, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. In other words, blessed are those people who do not look for evidence, who do not look for reasons.

They just believe. And if that is the perception that a person has of Christianity and they value evidence and reason and arguments, you can understand perhaps that that may be an objection to them considering Christianity.

Now, if you're not yet sympathetic with that perspective, with that concern, then let me just kind of turn it around to another scenario. A couple of years ago, probably about five years ago, I was down on White Avenue in Edmonton.

It was in February, and they came upon two Mormon missionaries, or rather, I should say, they came upon me and they struck up a conversation. These are not those two missionaries, but these are two reasonable facsimiles of them.

They were young guys like this with their name tags all ready to share their faith. And so we started talking about Mormonism. I felt sorry for this one guy because he was from Arizona, and he was minus 18 Celsius outside.

[8 : 13] He did not have a toque on his head, and so his ears were becoming colder and redder with every moment of our conversation. So in recognition of that fact, I'm just going to put a toque on this guy's head because I felt sorry for him.

So then we're talking back and forth, and they're telling me why they think that Mormonism is the one true religion and the fulfillment of the revelation of Jesus Christ. And because I'm a seminary professor and I teach church history, I began asking them about some of the objections I had to their claims.

The claim in particular that an angel of Moroni visited Joseph Smith in upstate New York in 1828 and gave these wonderful revelations that are allegedly in the Book of Mormon. One of the claims I pointed out to them is I said that Mormonism claims that there was a mass apostasy of the Christian church just after the death of the last apostle, like after the death of John.

All the other Christians of the time rejected and lost the true teachings of the church, and it was only later, 1,800 years later, when Joseph Smith came along that the true teaching of the church was restored.

That's what Mormons claim. And so I asked these Mormons, I said, but here's my problem. I teach church history, and I know fairly well the period from the time of the apostles through the second, third, fourth centuries.

[9 : 41] So I know, for example, that there was an unbroken succession of teachers ensuring the true teachings of the church. In fact, in about the year 180, Irenaeus, a well-known theologian of the time, he wrote in his book Against Heresies that there were people of the time, this is in the 180s, so about 150 years after the death of Jesus, there were people saying that the Christians of the time had lost their true teachings of the church, much like the Mormons do today.

And Irenaeus responds to them, and he says, that's not true, and we know it's not true, because we have an unbroken succession of leaders back to the original apostles like Peter and John and James.

So, there's no place, there's no room, according to Irenaeus, for false teaching to enter in, because with every generation, the true teachings were passed on.

And so I said to these Mormons, you claim that in the same period that Irenaeus is talking about, that there was a mass apostasy, but Irenaeus shows us that wasn't the case. What response do you have?

And they had no response. Well, that's not exactly true. They did have one response. They told me, well, we don't know how to respond to your objection, but we do know this, that if you pray about the Book of Mormon, and if you ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth of it to you, he will give you a burning in your chest, and you will know that it is true.

[11 : 07] Well, the problem, I said to them, is that there are many different religious experiences people can have, but the religious experience doesn't provide a direct response to the fact that there is this evidence, this evidence that Mormonism is false.

The claims of Mormonism are false. So before I'm going to consider praying and asking whether the Book of Mormon is true, I'm going to need you to provide evidence to respond to my objections, and they couldn't provide it.

And so we had to go our separate ways. But see, this is the problem now, similarly, that many skeptics have Christianity. They say, well, Christianity, you're just asking me to have an experience.

You don't want me to look for reasons and evidence. And if we Christians want to see reasons and evidence in Mormons to respond to our objections, shouldn't we likewise have reasons and evidence to respond to the objections of others?

And yet, Jesus says, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. So how do we bring that together? In the time, then, that we have remaining, I want to offer a response to this problem, which I'm going to call the faith problem.

[12 : 17] Must we choose between faith and evidence? Either you believe without seeing, or you are a sub-Christian, and you actually use your brain and look at reason and evidence.

Do we have to choose? I'm going to argue that no, we don't have to choose. In fact, if we go back and look at the New Testament, and in particular, I'll focus on Jesus, and also talk a little bit about the Apostle Paul, we can see that Jesus shows us, in fact, the importance of evidence.

Far from diminishing the value of evidence, Jesus shows us the importance of evidence. Jesus also shows us the limits of evidence.

Because while evidence is important, it does have limits. And finally, Jesus shows us the right response to evidence. So let's get started. Number one, Jesus shows the importance of evidence.

And what I want to do here is simply give us some examples in the ministry of Jesus to show that as Jesus taught and made claims about himself and his own authority, he always backed up those claims with evidence.

[13 : 33] Here's an example in John 10, 38. He says, even though you do not believe me, believe the works that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I in the Father.

Here he says, you don't just have to take my word for it. Look at the works, in particular, the miracles. Now, in the Gospel of John, there are seven great signs or miracles.

They begin with the water turning into wine. They culminate in the death or the raising of Lazarus. And then beyond that, those all point ultimately toward the ultimate sign, the resurrection of Jesus himself.

Now, throughout the Gospel of John, miracles provide evidence for the claims that Jesus has made. So far from rejecting evidence throughout the Gospel of John, the very passage that we've been looking at in John 20, evidence is important.

It's central. Another good example in Mark, Mark chapter 2, a very familiar story of the man who was paralyzed, handicapped, and he was, his friends removed part of the thatch of the roof, and they drop him in front of Jesus, and Jesus forgives his sins.

[14 : 49] And, of course, that's a scandal for the Jews to say, well, only God can forgive sins. So Jesus says this, but I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

So he said to the man, I tell you, get up, take your mat, and go home. He got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of them all.

This amazed everyone, and they praised God, saying, we've never seen anything like this. So note there that Jesus doesn't say, hey, blessed are you if you believe that I have the ability to forgive sins without evidence.

No. He provides evidence. He says, I want you to know that I have this authority. I will perform a sign, a miracle. And the miracle is the evidence for the claim.

In Acts 1-3, this is after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and it's during the time of the appearances of Jesus to his disciples. Have you ever wondered why he spent 40 days with the apostles and disciples after his resurrection?

[16 : 02] This is part of the explanation right here. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs, evidence, that he was alive.

He appeared to them over a period of 40 days. He appeared in a locked room. He appeared on a beach. He ate fish with them. He told them to put their hands into his hands and into his side. And he spoke about the kingdom of God.

So he gave them evidence that he was raised, evidence that they could not deny, that this was not simply some appearance at a glance, a vision, maybe a dream. No.

He actually lived among them for weeks after his death. He was indeed raised from the dead. And it was based upon that foundation of evidence that the proclamation of the good news went forth from Jerusalem.

It is clearly Jesus throughout his ministry who appealed to evidence. And it's not surprising then that his followers, people such as the apostle Paul, likewise look to the centrality of evidence.

[17 : 09] And if you want a simple place to see where Paul focused on and valued evidence, look to Acts chapter 17. At the beginning of the chapter, Paul is in going to the synagogues.

When Paul and his companions had passed through Anthropolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days, look at this, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.

Paul is not simply talking about his feelings. He's not only sharing a testimony. I'm sure he would have shared his testimony on the road to Damascus, and that is an important and significant experience.

But the Jews might well have said, we've had our own experiences, just like I've said to the Mormon. What more can you say in evidence to ground your claims?

Paul reasoned. From the authorities, he knew the Jews accepted the scriptures. And he reasoned not for just 20 or 30 minutes. He reasoned for days, because he knew this inside out.

[18 : 25] He knew his arguments. And he was convinced the importance of argument and evidence as a foundation for the proclamation of the Christian faith. Now, in Thessalonica, this is where we get the first, or one of the first glimpses of the limits of evidence, because, as I'll say more in a moment, evidence definitely has its limits.

And so, eventually, the Jews in Thessalonica become more or less resistant to him, and Paul leaves. But then he goes to Berea, and to another synagogue, and he reasons with them.

And we read this. The Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they examined the message with great eagerness. And they received it with great eagerness, and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

They are commended for keeping an open mind. So often, we can get into the trap of beginning to think we've got it all figured out, and we can have a little box that screens out any evidence that goes against our beliefs.

The Bereans were not like that. They kept an open mind. They still critically reasoned and tested everything that Paul said, but they kept an open mind and looked at his claims.

[19 : 49] Evidence and argument were central to the proclamation of the gospel for Paul. And indeed, later on in the chapter, he then goes to Athens.

And when he's in Athens, Paul is not dealing now with a Jewish synagogue. He's dealing with secular Greeks. Well, I don't know if you called them secular. They were certainly religious.

They just were not Jewish. They were not Christian, of course. They were, you could call them pagans, right? They were Stoics. They were Epicureans, maybe some Platonists, Aristotelians and others.

And he went to them and he talked to them about a statue they had to an unknown God. And he says, I'm going to proclaim that God to you. Very different approach to argument because they didn't accept the Bible.

And then he actually quotes in Acts 17, some Stoic philosophers. For in him, we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring.

[20 : 50] He quotes two scholars, Epimenides and Eratos, well-known among the Stoics. And he approves favorably what they say and uses it as part of his argument. Paul is developing here an extended argument to reach Greeks.

So Paul also clearly valued evidence and he would actually tailor his arguments to whether he was in a Jewish or a Greek audience. So evidence and argument is important.

It's central to the proclamation of Jesus and the gospel of his saving work. But evidence is also limited and that brings us to the second point.

Now, let's go back to Mark 2 for a moment. You remember in Mark 2, we saw that Jesus performed a miracle. A miracle of healing a man who could not walk in order to show that he had the power, the authority to forgive sins.

So what happened after that miracle? Did the people who were skeptical of Jesus suddenly come over to his side based upon the evidence? Let's read in chapter three.

[22 : 00] Another time, Jesus went into the synagogue and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. So they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, stand up in front of everyone. Then Jesus asked them, which is lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill.

But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts. He said to the man, stretch out your hand.

He stretched it out and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Wow. Here, Jesus performs another miracle, another sign, attesting to his unique status and authority. And the response, the response is, they now look for a reason to kill him.

[23 : 13] Things have gotten worse, not better. I think we can learn a couple of things from this passage about the limits of evidence. One thing is that we learn about what psychologists call confirmation bias.

A confirmation bias is when you screen evidence to look for evidence that supports your view and to disregard evidence that goes against your view. Here's an example.

A few years ago, I got in a debate with somebody and I don't remember the topic, but I do remember that when I got home, I said, you know, I'm going to look for evidence to support my position.

So since I'm an academic, I teach at a seminary, I did what every good academic does. I went to Google and I Googled it. And I looked at the page.

That was a joke, by the way. We don't actually start with Google. But anyway, in this case, I did. I went to Google and I started looking down the first page of the search results. I had said X in the argument.

[24 : 19] My friend had said Y. So I started going down the page and everything was saying Y. I went to the next page of search results. Y, Y, Y, Y, Y.

Finally, on the third page, halfway down, I finally came to a website where somebody had said X. Yes! I said I was vindicated. I knew I was right after all.

Now, the reality was, even with my confirmation bias, I had to admit that was kind of ridiculous. I was ignoring all the places that said Y and just looking for one example of something that said X because I wanted to justify X.

that's an example of confirmation bias. And we all have it. And it limits the strength of evidence often. So if we go back to the passage, we read this.

Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. That's confirmation bias. They were not looking by keeping an open mind that he was indeed the Messiah.

[25 : 23] They were only looking for a reason to accuse him. If all you're looking for is a reason to accuse, you will find the evidence you're looking for.

But of course, that's not a very reasonable position to take. Another thing where you see the limits of evidence in this passage is in what is called backfire effect.

You see, psychologists have also known that when people don't want to accept a particular conclusion, then if you provide evidence for that conclusion, ironically, they may become even more opposed to the conclusion, to the claim.

So the evidence, even though it's good evidence, it can backfire. And again, we see this. After Jesus provides another evidence of his miraculous power and healing, that's when they plan to kill him.

They've actually won up the game even though he provided evidence that he is Messiah. I'm reminded here of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man where the rich man is in Sheol and Hades awaiting judgment after death and he begs for Abraham to send an angel back to warn his brothers and Abraham says, look, if they did not believe the prophets, they will not even believe if someone rises from the dead.

[26 : 44] it is a sober reminder that if you don't want to accept evidence, you will not be persuaded. You may even retrench and become more strongly based in your opposition when evidence is provided to you of the wrongness of your position.

So evidence is important, argument is valuable, but it has limits because people often are irrational. We have confirmation and other biases. We might have a backfire effect because we don't really want to accept something.

Let me give you a concrete example of this. So this is a well-known atheist and skeptic today. His name is Michael Shermer. Some years ago, I heard Michael Shermer on a British talk show, a radio show, where they often debate apologetics issues.

And the show is called Unbelievable. There's a Christian on there talking about miracles and evidence for miracles. And then there was Michael Shermer here expressing skepticism, doubting that there was any evidence for any miracles.

And at one point, the host, Justin Brierley, said to Shermer, what would it take for you to believe that a miracle had indeed occurred? And Shermer said this, I don't believe a miracle occurred if a person was missing a limb and you prayed for them and right after you prayed for them, their limb grew back.

[28 : 14] That would convince me that a miracle had occurred. A little later in the show, Shermer returned to that point and he said, you know what, actually, that wouldn't convince me that a miracle had occurred.

If a person was missing a limb, he said, and you prayed for them and the limb grew back, I would conclude that the human body has the power to regenerate limbs.

Okay. You know what? If you don't want to accept the evidence for a miracle, you will not be persuaded. That much is clear. That does not mean you're being particularly rational.

It shows, in fact, I would submit the limits of evidence. So while argument and evidence is important and central to the Christian tradition, it has limits. Now we're going to conclude in just a couple minutes here.

Jesus shows the right response to evidence. I want to return to this tweet. Remember, this was a criticism. Daily Atheism is criticizing Osteen for saying, the facts may tell you one thing, but God is not limited by the facts.

[29 : 30] Choose faith in spite of the facts. Now, I don't know what you think of Joel Osteen. Some people really like him. Other people, not so much. But I do want to say this, that I think, in fact, Daily Atheism is being very unfair here.

I think what Joel Osteen is saying is something that's actually very sensible. He's saying this. We don't all have it worked out. We don't understand everything, and there are times when you've got to place trust.

You've got to place trust maybe in a medical doctor who's performing a procedure on you that you don't understand. If you're climbing the mountains, you might have to trust the guy that you're with because he knows the mountains better than you.

Sometimes life, things happen in life and you've got to trust God above all. Trust is not an unreasonable position at all. It's a very reasonable position. And I think what Osteen is giving here is just some good common sense advice.

Sometimes you choose to trust God even when the situation doesn't seem to make sense to you. That's what he's saying, and I think that is correct. That brings me to the last point.

[30 : 43] The right response to faith is to make the proper response to the evidence that's been provided to you. I think here of the story of the great Blondin, and I first heard this story when I was running the Alpha Course 20-some years ago.

In the course, Mickey Gumbel would tell the story. The year was 1859. The great Blondin was a famous high-wire balance walker, and he came to Niagara Falls, and they put the cable that he would walk on across Niagara Falls.

People knew of his reputation. He was famous, and they came from far and wide to see if he could walk the falls, and he did. After he came back, everybody cheered, and then Blondin said this, do you think that I could carry somebody across, or do you think I could carry a wheelbarrow across the falls?

And everybody said, you can do it. They had just seen what he had done. They heard of his reputation. They said, you can do it. And he did. He got a wheelbarrow, and he ran across the falls and came back.

Then he said this, do you think I could carry a bag of flour in this wheelbarrow across the falls? Everybody cheered and said, you can. We believe it. Sure enough, he did.

[32 : 06] Everybody cheered. Ben Blondin said this, do you think that I could carry a person in the wheelbarrow across the falls? Everybody cheered.

You can do it. They'd heard of his reputation. They'd seen him go across. They'd seen him bring a wheelbarrow and a wheelbarrow full of flour. Yeah, you can carry a person.

And then Blondin said, fine, somebody get in. Nobody would get in. Eventually, one person got in, and in fact, it was his mother.

Yes, he did carry her across. See, the lesson here is this. Those people came there knowing of Blondin's reputation and they saw him actually perform great acts and still they wouldn't trust in him.

Thomas had lived with Jesus for at least three years, seen him perform many miracles. He had even warned the apostles he was going to rise from the dead and now all these people are coming to Thomas and saying, Jesus has risen, we've seen him.

[33 : 14] And still he would not believe. The lesson here is not that Thomas is being especially rational, but he's being unrational. He's being unreasonable because he would not trust in the evidence that had been provided for him.

That's what Jesus means, I want to submit, when he says, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. It's not, blessed are those who turn their brains off, don't care about evidence and arguments.

No, it's, blessed are those who use their minds and take a proper step of faith. And so, my question to each one of us, when things don't make sense, such as in the current COVID-19 crisis, we nonetheless have seen God perform great acts.

I believe that we can trust God, we can take that step of faith. Let us pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us a gospel that doesn't ask us to turn off our brains and reject evidence, but rather engages us, mind, body, and spirit, that you provided us with a proclamation of Christ's victorious resurrection and his atoning death that we can proclaim in confidence to a skeptical world, doing so based both upon the evidence of the first century and the evidence of his working in our lives today.

We pray that we would have the confidence and faith to go forward and trust in you even when things don't make sense. We pray all these things in Christ's name. Amen.