

FAITH AND REASON – 1

I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT A FRIEND OF MINE. HIS NAME IS WALTER. WALTER AND I HAVE KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR 34 YEARS. HE IS A BONAFIDE GENIUS—A PHD IN PHYSICS AND A NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED EXPERT ON HEALTHCARE POLICY.

WHEN I WAS IN THE BUSINESS WORLD, WALTER AND I WORKED TOGETHER ON A SYSTEM TO MEASURE THE QUALITY OF HEALTHCARE PROVIDED BY VARIOUS HOSPITALS IN THE CLEVELAND AREA. DURING THE TIME I WORKED WITH WALTER I BECAME CONVINCED THAT HE WAS THE MOST BRILLIANT PERSON I HAD EVEN KNOWN.

WALTER IS ALSO CONFIRMED ATHEIST. WHEN I TOLD HIM THAT I WAS LEAVING THE BUSINESS WORLD TO GO TO SEMINARY TO PREPARE TO ENTER PASTORAL MINISTRY, HE WAS APALLED. HE SAID: “OH COME ON! SURELY YOU’RE TOO SMART TO BELIEVE IN GOD AND SATAN AND HEAVEN AND HELL AND ALL THAT STUFF!” I SAID, “WALTER, I’M TOO SMART TO DOUBT IT.”

WELL, THAT STARTED AN “ARGUMENT BY E-MAIL” WHICH HAS GONE ON FOR THE PAST 27 YEARS. FOR WALTER, RELIGION—ESPECIALLY CHRISTIANITY— IS SUPERSTITION. THE ONLY RELIABLE GUIDE TO TRUTH IS SCIENCE. SCIENCE IS OBJECTIVE AND UNTAINTED BY EMOTIONS OR POLITICS OR ANYTHING ELSE THAT GETS IN THE WAY OF HONEST, RELIABLE, INTELLECTUAL INQUIRY. SCIENCE IS THE KEY TO HUMAN PROGRESS. AS YOU CAN IMAGINE, WALTER HAS NO USE FOR THINGS LIKE FAITH AND MYSTERY AND SPIRITUALITY.

FOR HIM, “FAITH” IS JUST WISHFUL THINKING; “MYSTERY” MERELY REFERS TO THINGS WE DON’T PRESENTLY UNDERSTAND, BUT ONE DAY WILL— THROUGH SCIENCE, OF COURSE; AND SPIRITUALITY IS A FAIRYLAND. ONLY THE APPLICATION OF REASON—RATIONAL INQUIRY—WILL LEAD US TO THE TRUTH.

NOW THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHO AGREE WITH WALTER. DECENT, INTELLIGENT, THOUGHTFUL PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO USE FOR RELIGION. WHO ARE NICE TO ONE ANOTHER, WHO LEAD RESPONSIBLE LIVES AND WHO BELIEVE IN HELPING OTHERS IN TIMES OF NEED. THEY DON’T NECESSARILY *HATE* RELIGION—THEY JUST DON’T FIGURE THEY HAVE ANY NEED OF IT. REASON IS ENOUGH, THEY SAY.

NOW MAKE NO MISTAKE, REASON IS ONE OF THE GREATEST GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN MAN. AND SCIENCE IS ESSENTIALLY THE USE OF REASON TO DISCOVER

THE LAWS THAT GOVERN THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE BY OBSERVING, MEASURING AND EXPERIMENTING UPON PHYSICAL PHENOMENA, SCIENTISTS DISCOVER LAWS LIKE: FORCE EQUALS MASS TIMES ACCELERATION. ENERGY EQUALS MASS TIMES THE SPEED OF LIGHT SQUARED. AND THERE IS NO QUESTION ABOUT THE FACT THAT THE DISCOVERY OF THESE AND OTHER LAWS OF NATURE HAVE ENABLED MAN TO MAKE ENORMOUS PROGRESS. INNOVATIONS IN COMMUNICATION, TRANSPORTATION, MEDICINE AND INFORMATION SCIENCE OVER THE PAST TWO CENTURIES BOGGLE THE IMAGINATION. SCIENCE HAS VASTLY INCREASED OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE FROM SUBATOMIC PARTICLES TO THE MEASUREMENT OF GALAXIES.

BUT—AND THIS IS A BIG BUT—WHILE SCIENCE CAN TEACH US A LOT ABOUT THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE IT CANNOT TEACH US ANYTHING ABOUT WHAT LIES BEYOND THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE. ANYTHING THAT CANNOT BE OBSERVED OR MEASURED—OR INFERRED FROM WHAT CAN BE OBSERVED OR MEASURED—IS BEYOND THE REACH OF THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD. THINGS LIKE: GOD AND SATAN AND HEAVEN AND HELL AND ALL THAT STUFF.

THE EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF SUCH THINGS CANNOT BE PROVEN OR DISPROVEN BY EMPIRICAL SCIENCE BECAUSE EMPIRICAL SCIENCE DEALS ONLY WITH THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE. THE KNOWLEDGE OF SPIRITUAL THINGS COMES ONLY FROM BEYOND THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE—FROM GOD.

SO, AS THE SCIENTIST'S STUDY IS NATURE, THE BELIEVER'S STUDY IS THE WORD OF GOD. THE SCIENTIST'S TOOLS ARE INSTRUMENTS OF DETECTION AND MEASUREMENT. THE BELIEVER'S TOOLS ARE PRAYER, STUDY AND STRUGGLE OVER THE WORD OF GOD. THE SCIENTIST'S JOURNEY IS ILLUMINATED BY REASON. THE BELIEVER'S JOURNEY IS ILLUMINATED BY FAITH.

WHICH BRINGS US TO TODAY'S EPISTLE LESSON: *THE BOOK OF HEBREWS*. THE AUTHOR OF *HEBREWS* IS INTERESTED IN SHOWING THAT ALL THE GREAT FIGURES IN THE OLD TESTAMEN WALKED BY FAITH. HE BEGINS WITH A SIMPLE DEFINITION OF FAITH: "*NOW FAITH IS BEING SURE OF WHAT WE HOPE FOR AND CERTAIN OF WHAT WE DO NOT SEE.*" IT CAN'T BE SAID ANY SIMPLER THAN THAT, I'M PRETTY SURE THAT EVEN WALTER WOULD AGREE WITH THAT DEFINITION. THEN THE AUTHOR GIVES SEVERAL EXAMPLES OF FAITH IN ACTION. WE'LL LOOK AT THREE OF THEM: FAITH THAT GOD CREATED THE UNIVERSE, NOAH'S FAITH IN BUILDING THE ARK, AND ABRAHAM'S FAITH THAT THINGS THAT SEEM IMPOSSIBLE TO MAN ARE POSSIBLE WITH GOD.

FIRST, FAITH THAT GOD CREATED THE UNIVERSE: "*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.*" THIS IS FOUNDATIONAL,

PRIMITIVE FAITH. NO ONE WAS THERE. NO ONE COULD HAVE BEEN BECAUSE NO ONE EXISTED YET. ALL WE HAVE IS GOD'S WORD ON IT AND WE TAKE IT BY FAITH. IN THIS CASE, HOWEVER, FAITH AGREES WITH REASON. BECAUSE REASON ITSELF TELLS US THAT SINCE MATTER AND ENERGY DON'T CREATE THEMSELVES, THEY HAD TO HAVE BEEN CREATED. LEAD DOESN'T CREATE LEAD; LIGHT DOESN'T CREATE LIGHT. THERE HAD TO HAVE BEEN A CREATOR. AND THAT CREATOR IS WHO WE CALL GOD.

PAUL TAKES THIS THEME UP IN THE FIRST CHAPTER OF HIS *LETTER TO THE ROMANS*.

"...WHAT MAY BE KNOWN ABOUT GOD IS PLAIN TO MEN BECAUSE GOD HAS MADE IT PLAIN TO THEM. FOR SINCE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD GOD'S INVISIBLE QUALITIES—HIS ETERNAL POWER AND DIVINE NATURE—HAVE BEEN CLEARLY SEEN BEING UNDERSTOOD FROM WHAT HAS BEEN MADE..."
[Rm. 1;19-20]

CREATION IMPLIES A CREATOR. FURTHERMORE, JUST AS CREATION IMPLIES A CREATOR—ORDER IMPLIES AN ORGANIZER BECAUSE ORDER DOESN'T COME ABOUT ON ITS OWN. CHAOS HAPPENS NATURALLY; ORDER HAS TO BE IMPOSED. AND THE UNIVERSE ABOUNDS WITH ORDER. THE INCREDIBLE ORDER AND INTRICACY OF LIFE EXCEEDS THE POWER OF MAN TO DUPLICATE AS FAR AS THE HEAVENS SURPASS THE EARTH. [BLADE OF GRASS EXAMPLE]

SO BOTH THE FACT OF CREATION AND THE ORDER OF LIFE BEAR WITNESS TO A CREATOR GOD. PAUL GOES ON TO AFFIRM THAT WHEN MEN DENY THESE SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS, *"...THEIR THINKING BECOMES FUTILE AND THEIR FOOLISH HEARTS ARE DARKENED. ALTHOUGH THEY CLAIM TO BE WISE, THEY BECOME FOOLS..."* AS THE PROVERB SAYS: *"ONLY A FOOL SAYS IN HIS HEART, 'THERE IS NO GOD'"* SO BOTH FAITH AND REASON TELL US THAT GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH.

OF COURSE IN THE BEGINNING, BEFORE SIN CAME INTO THE WORLD, MAN HAD NO NEED FOR FAITH BECAUSE HE WALKED IN THE PRESENCE OF ALMIGHTY GOD WHO WAS HIMSELF TRUTH AND REALITY: THE ULTIMATE "I AM." BUT SIN DID ENTER THE WORLD, SEPARATING MAN FROM GOD AND CREATING THE NEED FOR FAITH—OF WHICH THE FIRST GREAT EXAMPLE IS NOAH.

IT WAS NOAH'S FAITH—NOT HIS CHARACTER—THAT MADE HIM RIGHTEOUS IN THE EYES OF GOD, FOR GOD HAD ALREADY SAID OF MANKIND THAT, *"...EVERY INCLINATION OF THE THOUGHTS OF HIS HEART WAS ONLY EVIL ALL THE TIME."* EVEN AFTER THE FLOOD—WHEN ONLY NOAH AND HIS FAMILY WERE LEFT—GOD SAID THAT, *"EVERY INCLINATION OF MAN'S HEART IS EVIL FROM CHILDHOOD."* WHAT NOAH HAD WAS GREAT FAITH—FAITH ENOUGH TO BUILD A COLOSSAL BOAT IN ANTICIPATION OF A COLOSSAL FLOOD WHICH HAD

BEEN PROMISED BY AN INVISIBLE GOD—SIMPLY BECAUSE GOD HAD TOLD HIM TO. HE TRUSTED THE WORD OF GOD.

“NOAH FOUND FAVOR IN THE EYES OF THE LORD,” BECAUSE FAITH MADE HIM CERTAIN OF THINGS HE COULD NOT SEE. NOAH WAS THE FIRST EXAMPLE IN THE BIBLE OF A MAN MADE RIGHTEOUS THROUGH FAITH.

THE THIRD AND GREATEST EXAMPLE OF FAITH AND THE ONE HELD UP BY OTHER AUTHORS OF THE BIBLE AS PERFECT IS THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM. ABRAHAM DEMONSTRATED UNFLINCHING FAITH ON THREE SEPARATE OCCASIONS. FIRST OF ALL, WHEN GOD TOLD HIM TO TAKE HIS FAMILY AND ALL HIS POSSESSIONS AND GO TO A STRANGE LAND HE HAD NEVER HEARD OF—ABRAHAM GOT UP AND WENT THERE WITHOUT ASKING A SINGLE QUESTION.

THE AUTHOR WRITES, “BY FAITH ABRAHAM WHEN CALLED TO GO TO A PLACE HE WOULD LATER RECEIVE AS HIS INHERITANCE OBEYED AND WENT, EVEN THOUGH HE DIDN’T KNOW WHERE HE WAS GOING.” ALL ABRAHAM KNEW BY HIS FAITH WAS THAT WHERE GOD TOOK HIM WOULD BE WHERE GOD WANTED HIM TO BE. HE TRUSTED THE WORD OF GOD.

THE SECOND TIME ABRAHAM SHOWED GREAT FAITH WAS WHEN GOD PROMISED HIM THAT HE WOULD HAVE A SON EVEN THOUGH HE WAS WELL PAST HIS CHILD-BEARING YEARS. THE AUTHOR WRITES. “BY FAITH ABRAHAM, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS PAST AGE—AND SARAH HERSELF WAS BARREN—WAS ENABLED TO BECOME A FATHER BECAUSE HE CONSIDERED HIM FAITHFUL WHO HAD MADE THE PROMISE.” AND SO WE ARE TOLD, “ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD AND HE CREDITED IT TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

THE THIRD—AND GREATEST EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM’S FAITH WAS WHEN GOD COMMANDED HIM TO SACRIFICE THE SON GOD HAD GIVEN HIM. THIS WAS ISAAC—THE PROMISED SON GOD HAD GIVEN ABRAHAM IN HIS OLD AGE, THE SON WHOM HE DEARLY LOVED. YET AT GOD’S COMMAND, ABRAHAM TOOK HIS SON UP ON MOUNT MORIAH AND RAISED HIS KNIFE TO SLAY HIM—BECAUSE HE TRUSTED THE WORD OF GOD. AND BEFORE THE KNIFE COULD FALL, GOD INTERVENED, ALLOWING A RAM TO BE SACRIFICED IN ISAAC’S PLACE SO THAT ISAAC WOULD LIVE.

MUCH LATER, GOD WOULD ALLOW ANOTHER LAMB TO BE SACRIFICED ON MOUNT MORIAH SO THAT ALL OF GOD’S CHILDREN COULD HAVE ETERNAL LIFE. FOR MOUNT MORIAH LATER CAME TO BE CALLED MOUNT ZION AND THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB WOULD BE GOD’S OWN SON, JESUS CHRIST, THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TOOK OUR PLACE UNDER THE KNIFE OF GOD’S JUDGMENT UPON SIN. ON THE WAY UP THE MOUNTAIN, ISAAC HAD ASKED HIS FATHER, “WHERE

IS THE SACRIFICE?” AND ABRAHAM HAD REPLIED, “GOD WILL PROVIDE THE SACRIFICE, MY SON.” AND GOD DID—BECAUSE GOD ALWAYS DOES.

ABRAHAM SIMPLY BELIEVED WHAT HE ALREADY KNEW: THAT GOD KEEPS HIS WORD. AND THAT GAVE HIM A THREEFOLD FAITH THAT NEVER DESERTED HIM. HE KNEW THAT WHAT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE TO MAN IS POSSIBLE WITH GOD—FOR ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE WITH GOD.

WALTER CONSIDER’S FAITH AN ILLUSION, A FORM OF WILLFUL SELF-DECEPTION. HE DOESN’T UNDERSTAND THAT FAITH IS DIVINE EYESIGHT THAT GOD GIVES HIS CHILDREN WHICH ENABLES THEM TO DISCERN SPIRITUAL REALITY. TO BORROW A LINE FROM SHAKESPEARE: *“THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH THAN ARE DREAMED OF IN POOR WALTER’S PHILOSOPHY.”*

SCIENCE HAS ITS STUDY IN THE BOOK OF NATURE. CHRISTIANITY HAS ITS STUDY IN THE WORD OF GOD.

SCIENTISTS HAVE REASON; CHRISTIANS HAVE FAITH IN ADDITION TO REASON. REASON UNLOCKS THE SECRETS OF THE HERE AND NOW. FAITH SEES INTO ETERNITY.

AMEN.

Hebrews 11:1-17 Faith in Action

11 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

²This is what the ancients were commended for.

³By 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.

⁴By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.” For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

⁸By 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. ⁹By 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. ¹⁰For 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.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.