

Epidgraph: Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in the darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God? – Isaiah 50:10

The idea that the Creator of heaven and Earth, with all their beauty, wonder, and mystery, was at the same time a supersized Bible thumping preacher, obsessed with whether our thoughts were all in place and ready to condemn us for eternity to hell if they weren't made no sense – even though that was my operating (though unexamined) assumption as long as I could remember.

When the dust clears and in the quiet of your own heart, what kind of God do you believe in, really? And why?

I need to be willing to let go of what I think I know, and trust God regardless. And I have come to trust that God uses these moments.

Uh-oh moments help me break down the religious systems we create for ourselves that sooner or later block us from questioning, wondering, and therefore from growing. For many of us, faith is our rock-solid source of security and hope. It provides the map and values for how we navigate the world.

Watching certainty slide into uncertainty is frightening. Our beliefs provide a familiar structure to our messy lives. They give answers to our big questions of existence: Does God exist? Is there a right religion? Why are we here? How do I handle suffering and tragedy? What happens to us when we die? What am I here for? Answering these questions provides our lives with meaning and coherence by reigning in the chaos.

Another dynamic at work here is how friends, family, and church members would handle it if they knew what you were thinking. Feeling judged and banished is a common story among those who take a risk to let people in on their well-guarded secret.

My faith is more real, more textured, three dimensional, and without the constant fear of being wrong playing in my head or that God is disappointed in me for not acing a multiple-choice theology exam.

My spiritual community with clearly defined boundaries and all sorts of intellectual no-go zones was suffocating, but it had one thing going for it: a spiritual territory was clearly marked out for me. I “knew” what I believed. I had some freedom to stroll about, of course, but guards were stationed at the towers to discourage me from venturing too close to the electric fence. Thinking for myself wasn't necessary and in fact was actively frowned upon. In this model, true faith as correct thinking were two sides of the same coin – and that mentality had deeply formed my own spiritual identity.

Religious structure provides a sense of self. When no one is telling you what to believe, who is God to you? Is there a God? Seeking answers to those questions meant accepting the challenge of an unsettled faith. That takes courage, and if there is one part of my spiritual life that atrophied over the previous 20 years it was courage – the courage to think, to be honest, to be. I didn't know how to “do faith” without making sure my thoughts about God were lined up, and so, once those thoughts failed to be compelling, my faith sank.

I can choose to trust God with childlike trust regardless of how certain I might feel. I've come to see this process as sacred and ongoing. And it also takes courage.

When our beliefs are threatened, the instinct, understandably, is to . . . stay in the comfort of our familiar spiritual homes. But in resisting, we may actually be missing an invitation to take a sacred journey, where we let go of needing to be right and trust God regardless of what we feel we know or don't know. The key to seeing this unsettling discomfort as a sacred rather than damning task is to decouple our faith in God from our thoughts about God. That way faith doesn't rest on correct thinking.

In ways we do not even perceive, we all create God in our own image. No one just "follows" the Bible. We interpret it as a people with a past and present, and in community with others, within certain traditions, none of which is absolute. We all bring our broken and limited selves into how we think of God. We can't help but think of God in broken and limited ways, as creatures limited by time and space.

The Christian faith declares that God freely and lovingly entered the human drama uniquely in one member of the human race, Jesus of Nazareth. God is ok with our humanity. Here is the temptation: we can forget that we are human and delude ourselves into thinking that we can transcend our tiny place in the human drama and see from on high, as God sees. Walking the path of faith means trusting God enough to let our uh-oh moments expose how we create God to fit in our thinking.

We think true faith is dependent on maintaining a particular "knowledge set" and keeping a firm grasp on a tightly woven network of non-negotiable beliefs, guarding each one vigilantly, making sure they all stay above the water line – because if what we "know" sinks, faith sinks right down with it. Correct thinking provides a sense of certainty. This fear of losing a handle on certainty leads to a preoccupation with correct thinking, making sure familiar beliefs are defended and supported at all costs.

Recall those history courses where we read about Christians killing other Christians over all sorts of disagreements about doctrines few can even articulate today. Or perhaps just think of a skirmish you've had at church over a sermon, Sunday-school lesson, or which candidate to vote into public office. Preoccupation with correct thinking. That's the deeper problem. It reduces the life of faith to sentry duty, a 24/7 task of pacing the ramparts and scanning the horizon to fend off incorrect thinking, in ourselves and others, too engrossed to come inside the halls and enjoy the banquet. A faith like that is stressful and tedious to maintain. Aligning faith in God and certainty about what we believe and needing to be right in order to maintain a healthy faith – these do not make for a healthy faith in God. In a nut shell, that is the problem. And that is what I mean by the "sin of certainty."

It is sin because this pattern of thinking sells God short by keeping the Creator captive to what we are able to comprehend – which is the very same problem the Israelites had when they were tempted to make images of God. For ancient people, images made the gods present for the worshippers, something tangible to look at to let them connect with the divine realm. But Israel's God said no. Any images shaped by human hands limit God. . . We don't make physical images of God. But we do make mental ones.

When we grab hold of "correct" thinking for dear life, when we refuse to let go because we think that doing so means letting go of God, when we dig in our heels, and stay firmly planted even when we sense that we need to let go and move on, at that point we are trusting our thoughts rather than God.

Thinking about what we believe, learning more about what we believe, and disagreeing and deliberating with others, are normal for people of faith. At least I hope so, because I've just described pretty much the entire history of Christianity and Judaism.

The life of faith and the life of thought are not opposite ends of the spectrum.

The deeper problem here is the unspoken need for our thinking about God to be right in order to have a joyful, freeing, healing, and meaningful faith. The problem is trusting our beliefs rather than trusting God.

The preoccupation with holding on to correct thinking with a tightly closed fist is not a sign of strong faith. It hinders the life of faith, because we are simply acting on a deep unnamed human fear of losing the sense of familiarity and predictability that our thoughts about God give us. We are not actually trusting God at that moment. We are trusting ourselves and disguising it as trust in God.

This book is about thinking differently about faith, a faith that is not so much defined by what we believe but in whom we trust. In fact, in this book I argue that we have misunderstood faith as a what word rather than a who word.

When holding to correct thinking becomes the center, we have shrunk faith in God to an intellectual exercise, a human enterprise, where differences need to be settled through debate first before faith can get off the ground. A faith that rests on knowing, where you have to “know what you believe” in order to have faith, is disaster upon disaster waiting to happen. It values to highly our mental abilities. All it takes to ruin that kind of faith is a better argument.

Christian faith is trusting in God, a personal being, rather than an abstract force. That’s why we often refer to faith in God as having a “relationship” with God.

Our marriage is not based on accurate knowledge of each other we hold with confident certitude. Our vows are based on our commitment to trust and pursue one another, whether or not we understand each other correctly and regardless of whether the relationship is moving along swimmingly. Even if we don’t like each other, annoy each other, or can’t stand the sight of each other, the commitment to trust is fundamental. In fact, trust is actually fundamental to being human. Trust is at the heart of any healthy relationship. Our relationship with God is no different.

Trust works regardless of where our thinking happens to be at the moment. But when correct thinking is central to faith, we transmit onto God our own distorted mental image of God, with all its baggage, hang-ups, and deep fears. That is a tense faith, which we cover up with cleverness and arrogance, and which slides easily to anger and hatred toward those who think differently.

I believe this journey of learning to let go, of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and thus learning to truly trust God is a journey of great courage and humility, and one I believe God wants us all to take, each of us in different times, different lengths, and for different reasons. This journey is sacred and transforms us. And without that transformation, we will not be able to [fulfill] our greatest religious obligations: to love God and neighbor.

Coming to faith involves sensing God’s presence, which may transcend or even defy our ability to rationally process the encounter.

The stumbling block here is our modern Western rational mind-set, which has put on a golden throne the human capacity for rational thinking, our ability to know and explain our reality through our thoughts.

Science in general and evolution in particular made knowledge-based Christians in the nineteenth century with Bibles in hand very nervous and for good reason.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

In what sense is the Bible God’s word when it looks like we can’t count on it to steer us through the real and urgent complexities of life?

Martin Luther had issues with the Roman Catholic Church [because] the Church was obscuring what he felt the gospel was all about – God’s forgiveness of our sins by God’s absolutely free mercy and love.

People in biblical times, simply didn’t have the same preoccupation with what to believe as modern people do. Does the heavenly divine realm actually exist? Was not a pressing question of the day. In fact, the divine realm did more than simply exist; it was the ultimate reality by which the mundane here-and-now world was explained.

When we see “belief” or “believe” in the Bible, we shouldn’t transport our overly intellectualized meaning onto biblical characters. If we replace these words (belief, believe) with trust, we’ll be closer to what the Bible is getting at. And we may be surprised and encouraged, at what we see.

The Greek word behind [belief] is the same one translated as “faith” elsewhere in the New Testament: pistis (PIS-TIS). When we see “believe” or “faith” in the New Testament: these are about all-in trust, not something we believe about God or Jesus. Pistis is also an action word – and here is where things get interesting. When used as an action word, pistis is usually translated as faithful / faithfulness or trustworthy / trustworthiness. Faith describes our whole way of looking at life and how we act on that. Faith is a conscious decision to trust – at it’s hard to let go of control and do that.

Jesus is God’s supreme, grand, climactic act of faithfulness. Not only that, but faithful also describes Jesus. Paul writes, “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. (Galatians 2:16). A better reading is “faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” Paul isn’t saying, you are not justified before God by your efforts, but by your faith.” The contrast he’s making isn’t between two options we have. The contrast is between your efforts and Jesus’ faithfulness to you – shown in his obedient death on a Roman cross. Paul is interested in telling readers about what Jesus did, about Jesus’ faithfulness, not what we do.

God’s grand act of faithfulness is giving his only Son for our sake. Jesus is all in. Now it’s our move, which really is the point of all this. Like God the Father and God the Son, we are also called to be faithful. On one level, we are faithful to God when we trust God. But faith – pistis – doesn’t stop there. It extends as we’ve seen, to faithfulness toward each other – in humility and self-sacrificial love. And here is the real kick in the pants. When we are faithful to each other like this, we are more than simply being nice and kind, though there’s that. Far more important, when we are faithful to each other, we are faithful to each other, we are at that moment acting like the faithful God and the faithful Son. Being like God. That’s the goal. And we are most like God not when we are certain we are right about God, or when we tell others how right we are, but when we are acting toward one another like the faithful Father and Son. Humility, love, and kindness are our grand acts of faithfulness and how we show that we are all in.