

Why bother believing?

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In this, the holiest season for Christians, when they ponder the death of Jesus for the sins of mankind, faith in the promise of salvation is nurtured. Easter is the time when Jesus demonstrated to all the power of faith. It is also the time when we are reminded that faith is fragile.

Belief is accepting a given matter as real and true on the testimony of someone else. Trust is at the core of all types of faith. In religious belief, we trust God's revelation as handed down in the Bible. But why accept a book written millennia ago as what God intended to reveal? Was Moses the greatest salesman ever, having convinced generations that God dictated to him the Ten Commandments?

It should come as no surprise that human beings did the writing. The alternative would be to require God to do the writing before our very eyes, but that wouldn't leave too much wiggle room for freely choosing to believe.

"Why bother believing? My life is just fine without faith." Perhaps for a time, but just like in the Boston Marathon, everyone eventually hits The Wall: basic questions that must be answered, the answers to which can only be found through revelation. As soon as a doctor says "You have six months to live," people start groping for answers and re-evaluating the purpose of life.

Answers to fundamental questions about life remain out of reach to the "naked eye" of scientific knowledge: What is our purpose on Earth, what happens after death, how can we make sense of suffering? Only the one who created us can ultimately answer those questions.

Believing God's answers demands a leap of faith. "Belief has always had something of an adventurous break or leap about it, because it represents the risky enterprise of accepting what plainly cannot be seen as the truly real and fundamental," Joseph Ratzinger wrote in his 1968 work, *Introduction to Christianity*.

This can grate against the intellectual discipline we learn at school to base our actions on immediate empirical evidence. Yet faith speaks to our hearts, where the drive to understand the full meaning of our existence pushes us to see beyond what is in front of us. The ability to listen to our hearts is a gift.

Someone could object: "You say that faith is a gift. I don't have it, so end of conversation." When we really want something we are capable of anything.

Someone who wants faith has to start by asking for the gift and, at the same time, adopting an attitude of trust.

Ratzinger recounts that Blaise Pascal, the 17th century philosopher, once locked horns with an unbeliever and finally got the latter to admit that he had to make a choice about God. But the unbeliever balked, hoping to find mathematical certainty about the issue. "Is there no way of illuminating the darkness and seeing the face of the cards?" "Yes, Scripture and all the other testimony of religion," said Pascal, who went on to assert: "You want to cure yourself of unbelief and you ask for a remedy? Take a lesson from those who were earlier racked by doubts like yourself. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed."

Some view faith as a fluffy, comforting oasis from meaningless death and the world's harsh realities. In fact, faith cannot just be viewed as an interesting escape; it requires a response. It is a gift, but it is probably the most challenging "gift" anyone could ever receive in that it demands a daily challenge to renew the very way we live. It is a gift we must unwrap ourselves, piece by piece.

Saint Josemaria Escriva, Opus Dei's founder, depicted faith as a gateway to the really real. In *The Way*, he wrote: "Most people have a plane-like vision, stuck to the Earth, of two dimensions. When you live a supernatural life, God will give you the third dimension: height, and with it, perspective, weight and volume."

For Christians, Easter is the time of year when they think about that third dimension, assessing whether they have really been listening for God's call, and asking themselves if they have the courage to follow their hearts, to see beyond the tangible, to listen and believe. To deepen their humanity by removing another layer of wrapping from the gift of faith that God's love offers all of us.

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