

FAITH VERSES KNOWLEDGE

John 20:29

By Raymond White

This is for those of you who sometimes believe and sometimes don't, who wish you had something more definitive than mere faith, something undeniable, a certain knowledge that it is all true and cannot not be true. My goal here is to make you feel comfortable in your faith, weak as it might be, and be content with it and rock solid in it.

[1] MY DEBATE

Decades ago, as I was about to walk into a supermarket, I was stopped by a well-meaning Christian missionary, a local pastor. He handed me a "Jesus Saves" pamphlet and asked me this question: "Do you *know* that you are going to heaven?" His inference being that if I didn't *know*, then I was obviously not going.

I answered him truthfully. No, I did not know for certain, but I believed I was going to heaven as a matter of faith.

He said something like: "That's unsettling, isn't it? Not knowing for certain? Wouldn't you rather know for certain?"

I said, yes, of course I would rather know for certain. But if I am ever blessed with that kind of knowledge, it will be God's doing and not mine. Such knowledge would be a result of direct prophetic revelation from God to me. That's not something that I can just reach up and grab but something he would have to choose to give me.

I also pointed out to this pastor that if salvation came from knowledge rather than by mere faith, then all Christians who live by faith, and have given themselves to Christ on the condition of faith, which the Bible demands, we must be damned because we only *believe* while others, the pastor and his friends, go to heaven because they *know*.

I said that couldn't possibly be true because of that most beloved verse —

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

That's the great promise, and that settles the question for me. Faith is sufficient; I don't need certain knowledge. That would be nice, but it is not essential.

[2] THOSE WHO KNOW AND THOSE WHO BELIEVE

Now, there are people who do know for certain. Ancient prophets *knew*. Moses *knew*. Peter *knew*. Paul *knew*. And maybe there are people today among us who *know* by some divine means things that the rest of us merely believe.

Alma 32:21 ...faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true. **:34** And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because ye know ...

So, some believe and some know. I imagine there are some today who have such privileged knowledge. If so, how they came by it is their personal story to tell. But I would not doubt nor criticize them for claiming to know. Quite the opposite, I'd be grateful for anyone who knows for certain those things I believe and hold dear. It is on such revealed knowledge that we ordinary Christians hang our faith.

But that does not mitigate faith. I am saved by *faith* (*Ephesians 2:8*) — not by works *and not by knowledge*. Some know and some believe and God accepts both.

1 Corinthians 12:8 For to one is given...the word of knowledge... :9 To another faith by the same spirit ...

Paul, claimed to *know*, and he knew because of his personal encounter with the Lord. I believe him. But Paul was surrounded by people who merely believed — their salvation was his life's work — and they were willing to die for that belief, and often did.

If salvation is by knowledge, then Paul's followers must be damned because they only believed. Such knowledge-based theology denies salvation to us weaker, faith-based, ordinary Christians. Fortunately for ordinary Christians who live by faith, the Bible says nothing of the sort, but instead offers salvation on the basis of faith alone.

Such theology may mean well—that you must *know*—but it is damaging in that it raises the bar *so* high that it discourages ordinary Christians. The essence of that *must know* message is this: “No, you don't *really* have salvation yet, because you only believe. To *really* be saved, you have to *know*.” Sorry, but that's just smug.

That message is damning because, while it intends to alleviate fear it actually causes fear, and causes ordinary Christians to stumble because that goal is impossible to achieve, and people walk away from Christ because they dismiss faith as unreliable.

But the peculiar thing about truth is that it doesn't matter how sure you are of it as long as it really is true and you're sure enough of it to live by it. This is not a contest of who believes the most with those who know coming out on top, God is not keeping score.

Salvation by knowledge is an impossible goal, as impossible as salvation by works. I can't attain either: a perfect life or a perfect knowledge.

What I can attain however — and have because God gave it to me — is faith. It may be fragile to be sure, but it's firm enough to guide my life. Just as this man whose fragile faith motivated him to bring his impaired son to Jesus —

Mark 9:24 And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.

And responding to that plea and that half-faith, Jesus healed the man's son.

In the end, it's all about trust, isn't it? I *trust* God to save me. Could I have a stronger relationship with God? No doubt. But that would be God's doing, it's out of my hands. For now, I have and enjoy what God has already given me: faith.

[3] SOME PROOF TEXTS

Here are a few more verses that make my point.

Ezekiel 37:3 And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.

God asked Ezekiel, can people live again. And Ezekiel's answer was basically: "I don't know. You tell me." That's a fair answer because it was the truth. "Thou knowest," is Ezekiel's terse way of saying, "How would I know? You're God, you tell me."

It's nice to know that this answer, this admission of ignorance, did not annoy God, because it's my answer to just about everything. Do I *know* that Jesus rose from the dead? I am as sure of that as I am of anything, but *sure* is not *certain*. Do I *know*? How *would* I know? *I wasn't there!* But I *believe* he did, and I live according to that belief.

Thomas is famous for his doubts, and his doubts are encouraging to me. First, because he had them; second, because they did not annoy Jesus; and third, because we who live by faith are on a par with those exceptional people who live by knowledge.

John 20:25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he [Thomas] said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. :26 And after eight days again, his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. :27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. :28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My LORD and my God. :29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

There are several wonderful, world changing messages in this text. But right now I'm after the final message: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

Jesus did not reject Thomas for wanting to *know*, and he will not reject me for wanting to know. But neither will he reject me because I *don't* know. He has instead blessed me because I *believe*. And though I want more, I am content with that.

2 Corinthians 5:7 For we walk by faith, not by sight.

Ephesians 2:8 By grace are ye saved through faith.

2 Nephi 2:9 they that believe in him shall be saved.

[4] WHY FAITH?

So, why does God give us mere faith and not knowledge? Surely, knowledge is the superior, isn't it? Knowledge is absolute and is never wrong, while faith is always a struggle, and is always suspect because by its nature could be wrong.

Also, faith is tiered; that is, it is multi-leveled. There is strong faith and weak faith and in-between faith. But there is no strong or weak knowledge, there is just knowledge. You either know a thing or you don't. And then there is deepening faith — whatever that is — but there is no such thing as deepening knowledge.

So, why does God leave us in the dark and insists that we *believe*? Why faith? He could rain angels down on us in a hail of open revelation, but he doesn't. Why not?

By asking this question I am not implying that no one knows. As I said, prophets *know*, and it is their witness that the rest of us believe *in*. Without their witness, there'd be nothing for us *to* believe. We could, of course, worship rocks or trees or the sun, but all of that is nonsense — faith without evidence, without witnesses is blind faith and is misplaced. Faith is only useful if it is in things that could actually be true. Believing in the Jewish God and the Christian messiah is not blind faith, but faith surrendering to the God who is evidenced by reasonable evidence and eyewitnesses.

John 21:24 ...we know that his testimony is true [why?] **:25** [because] *there are also many other things which Jesus did.*

So they *knew*. So, again the question: why faith? And why them and not us? Why are prophets lucky enough to see and know while ordinary Christians are told to believe?

Well, first off, who's to say that prophets are luckier? Jesus died on a cross, Peter too, Paul was beheaded, Isaiah was sawn in half, Jeremiah did his stint in prison as did Joseph. So, no, I don't see that prophets are luckier, they have their problems too. And as far as salvation is concerned, people of faith are on a parity with people of knowledge.

John 20:29 *Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.*

But isn't knowing a guarantee of salvation? Well, let's see. Cain knew because he spoke directly with God. How did he turn out? How about Balaam? How about Judas? How about the devils who know and tremble? Certain knowledge is no guarantee of anything. In fact, it puts people at greater risk. There were people who saw the miracles of Jesus yet rejected him and Jesus called them Sons of Perdition — (the point being that since they saw and rejected, there was nothing left for God to do that might still persuade them). So, seeing and knowing might actually be dangerous. Thus, that God accepts our faith rather than insisting that we *know*, that surely is an act of grace.

So, once again, why faith?

Here is my answer. See if this appeals to your intellect.

2 Nephi 2:16 *the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself, Wherefore man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other. :26* *they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon.*

In other words (as I see it), God has an interest in us acting *without* coercion.

And why would that be? Because he wants to see (or wants *us* to see) just what we're *really* made of. Not how we behave when we're forced to behave (like a naughty child whose hand gets slapped for sneaking a cookie) but how we behave when nobody is watching and nobody cares, or seems not to. What's really in our hearts? It's not just about faith, it's also about hope — what do we *want* to be true?

Certain knowledge would deprive us of that. With certain knowledge, our motives would always be suspect. “Well, yes, you were good,” Satan could argue, “but only because you knew what would happen if you weren’t good. Because you *knew*, maybe you acted out of terror and not out of any real goodness.” Thus knowledge deprives us of really knowing ourselves. It’s easy to face the lions if you *know* life after death is better, but if you only believe, ah, now that takes real courage, and a lot of trust and hope.

Faith, then, allows us — actually forces us — to really know ourselves. To “act for yourself and not be acted upon.” *You* decide what you *want* to be true, and chase *that*. Then you’ll know who you really are.

Also, there is this —

Hebrews 13:1 Faith is the substance of things hoped for...

This hints that in some way faith is the energy in us that creates. If God wants us to become like him, creators of worlds and universes, maybe the most important aspect of our being is our faith. And along with faith, hope — a strong, compelling desire in us for a thing to be true, so strong that we make it true by the power of our faith. After all, the universe came into existence because “God said...”

Sounds telekinetic, doesn’t it? Like Luke Skywalker using The Force. If we ever wield such power, what would we bring into being? Something good, as God’s universe, or something hideously evil? After all, Darth Vader wielded that force too, but the dark side of it. Maybe that’s why God leads good people to faith because that’s the real power. But we need to exercise it and learn how to make it work.

Now this question: But does that leave the prophets stuck? I mean, stuck with knowledge and therefore deprived of faith? Well, there is this —

Abraham 3:22 Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones; :23 And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou was born.

Who on earth are these pre-existent noble and great ones? Your opinion may be different than mine but I will share mine with you anyway, and that is this: These are the prophets. There were certain souls who were so valiant in the pre-life that God could trust them with prophetic knowledge which the rest of us would need to accept by faith. So they were deprived of faith and had to suffer knowledge. But that’s okay because they were God’s superstars and God knew they’d cope. We need faith, but they transcended faith because the rest of us needed them to and because they could — sort of like the super smart kid in grammar school who skipped a grade.

[5] AGNOSTICISM

Bertrand Russell was a marvelous man — a mathematician, a philosopher, and a humanitarian. One of the greatest things ever said by anyone was this from him: “Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge and an unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.”

Who can argue with that? Not me. I find those to be the passions of my life also.

But Bertrand Russell was flawed in that he never came to grips with God. He invented the word “agnostic” which means “without knowledge,” and that word has caused a lot of mischief in the world. Why? Because it has given people an excuse to not believe. It used to be that to not believe one had to affirmatively reject God. But now, with agnosticism, one doesn’t need to affirmatively reject, one can just sit on the sideline and never make a decision and to feel philosophically superior in that non-affirmation.

One who claims to be an agnostic (and Bertrand Russell was the quintessential agnostic) would argue this way: “I’m not saying that I believe in God and I’m not saying that I don’t. I am saying I don’t have enough information to decide one way or the other, therefore I’m stuck in the middle, neither believing nor disbelieving in God.”

Here is my counter-argument to that agnostic assertion. I’ll cast it as an imaginary conversation between Bertrand and myself. If I could interview him, I’d ask: “So what? What does insufficient information have to do with your believing or not believing? Salvation is not a matter of knowing, it is a matter of believing, so says the Bible, and believing is clearly the lesser commitment. So, Bertrand, do you believe in God or do you not? I don’t care what you know or don’t know.”

Bertrand would say, “I don’t believe and I don’t not believe. That’s my point.”

To which I’d say, “Your assertion is self-destructive. There is an excluded middle here. You can believe or you can not believe, your choice, but you can’t do both and you can’t do neither. You either do or you do not. Now, once more: do you believe or not?”

And he’d probably finally admit, “I guess then I do not believe because to believe would be to assert something that I do not know.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. I continue: “So, you are an atheist after all?”

“No. I’ve told you. I am an agnostic.”

“But the definition of an atheist is one who does not believe in God, and that’s you. Isn’t it?”

“(Sigh). I suppose I am if you phrase it like that. But I only don’t believe because of insufficient evidence. How could God condemn me for not knowing?”

“I don’t think God does condemn you, or anyone. But that’s not the point. Think of it like trying to escape a burning building. There’s an exit sign, and you must decide if the door under it leads to safety or to further danger. The believer says there is safety through that door. The atheist says there is no safety through that door. The agnostic says I don’t know, so I’ll...I’ll...I’ll what? This is a binary decision that you cannot avoid by indecision. There is no middle ground, no third state. You either go through or you don’t. To not decide is to decide. If you don’t go through the door and get burned up, that’s not God condemning you, that’s God providing an escape and you not taking it. And besides, we’re not talking about what you know or don’t know, we’re talking about what you believe or don’t believe. Do you believe that there is safety through that door, or at least

there might be, and believe it enough to actually go through it? Or, to get right to the point, do you believe that there is a God who loves you and wants to save you?"

"But maybe I'm so in terror of the fire that I can't think enough to decide."

"I know it's a tough question, so let's sneak up to it this way: Is there anything that you *believe* that you don't *know*?"

"I suppose there are some things."

"For example, do you believe that Japan exists?"

"Yes, of course."

"Have you been there?"

"No."

"Then how do you know, I mean for certain, that it's there?"

"You're being ridiculous."

"Yes I am. Well?"

"Because the best evidence is that there is a Japan off the east coast of Asia."

"Good. I believe that too, because, as you say, the best evidence convinces us that Japan really is there even though I've never been there and don't know for certain. Do you believe that Alpha Centauri exists?"

"Pardon?"

"The star. Alpha Centauri. Four light-years away. Do you believe it exists?"

"Well, yes. Of course I do."

"Even though it's four light-years away?"

"Ahah! You're trying to trick me. I suppose I don't *know* that it exists today until four years from now when its light arrives here to confirm *then* that it exists *now*."

"Very good. You're smart."

"So I've been told."

"But you didn't answer my question."

"(Sigh) And what was your question?"

"I didn't ask if you *know* it exists today, I asked if you *believe* it exists today."

"Alright, alright. Yes, I believe Alpha Centauri exists today, now, as we speak."

"And why is that?"

"Because it is highly unlikely that Alpha Centauri nova'd in the last four years."

"Very good. See? Believing is not so hard, is it? How about mathematics?"

"What about mathematics?"

"Do you believe mathematics works? Is mathematics, in a word, true?"

"Of course I believe mathematic is *true*. I wrote *Mathematica Principia*, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. But you also constructed Russell's Paradox which hints at deep problems in mathematics. But more to the point, what about your friend Kurt Gödel and his Incompleteness Theorem?"

"What about it?"

"Do you believe there are postulates that can't be known to be true or false?"

"Yes. Your point?"

"My point is, we may not know if one of Gödel's weird postulates is true or false, but *something* is true of it, we just don't know what that truth is. We also don't know what the tangent of zero is, or one divided by zero, or the square root of negative one is. But they do exist, right? Somewhere outside of human cognition."

"I believe so, but I don't know so, which is *my* point."

“Ah, you said the magic words, I believe. I don’t care what you know or don’t know, I care what you *believe*. In this case, you *believe* those unponderables of nature exist *somewhere*, or if not *somewhere*, then still *somehow*, some...I don’t know. But I do believe, though I don’t know, that unknowable truths do exist. You believe that. Right?”

“Yes I do.”

“What do you think is at the center of a black hole?”

“I don’t know what’s at the center of a black hole.”

“I didn’t ask what you know, I asked what you think. Surely you have some idea, a reasonable guess. If we’re not allowed to even guess, then we cannot even construct fanciful ideas and entertain them long enough to either prove or disprove. In short, human thought would stand frozen in time — if we’re to believe nothing except what we know for certain. Come on, give me your best guess. What do you think is in the middle of a black hole? We’re not talking about math and logic, we’re talking about real physics, real stuff. *Something* must be at the center of black holes. What do you guess it is?”

“*I don’t know!*”

“I didn’t ask you to know.”

“Okay, okay. Maybe a singularity.”

“Good for you. See? That wasn’t so hard. Do you believe that?”

“(Sigh). I *believe* that *maybe* there is a singularity at the center of every black hole. That’s as far as I can go.”

“Very good. General Relativity agrees with you.”

“Well, good for it.”

“But Quantum Mechanics disagrees with you.”

“Oh well.”

“Indeed. But you and I agree to believe one thing anyway: *something* is there.”

“I’ll give you that much. But I don’t *know* it.”

“But you *believe* it because nothing else makes sense.”

“Fine. Is this interview almost over? I have a class to teach.”

“What about the Big Bang?”

“(Sigh!) What about it?”

“If nothing can escape a black hole, how could the big bang have ever happened? It had to have been the biggest, blackest black hole of all time. If nothing could escape, how could it have banged?”

“Well, there is Hawking radiation.”

“That’s cheating. Stephen Hawking isn’t born yet. You have to go with science you have available to you today. After all, we’re talking about faith, so it’s okay to not know everything. And, anyway, Hawking radiation doesn’t explain everything.”

“All right. Knowing what we know (or think we know) about black holes, the big bang couldn’t have happened.”

“But you believe it happened even so.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because of Hubble’s red shift.”

“Ah. Best evidence again.”

“Of course.”

“You don’t *know* that the big bang happened, but you believe it.”

“That’s right.”

“Very good. You’re making such progress. So now, this question: What’s so wrong with believing something that you do not know, but which is supported by the best evidence available? Not proof, mind you, but the best *reasonable* evidence.”

“Well, since believing is often the only intellectual response we have available to respond to a proposition, I guess believing will often have to do in lieu of knowing — with the caveat that there must be some convincing reasonable evidence.”

“I’ll grant you that. But all of that now brings us back to the original question.”

“Which is?”

“Do you believe in God?”

“I don’t know.”

“I didn’t ask you that.”

“Alright then, have it your way. I don’t believe. Are you satisfied?”

“Finally, Bertrand, you’re honest with yourself. You’ve jumped off the agnostic fence onto one side — the wrong side, the atheist side, but still, that’s progress. You affirmatively believe there is no God.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because there is no reasonable evidence.”

“Good. *That* we can work with. It’s easier to deal with facts that atheist assert than non-facts that agnostics assert. But first, do you *want* to believe in God? Be honest.”

“Well, yes, of course. Who wouldn’t?”

“Exactly so. Would you allow me to explore the Bible with you?”

“Well, okay, but some other time.”

“Good. I’ll hold you to it. And by the way. I have a secret. Shall I tell you?”

“Sure.”

“I’m an agnostic too.”

“Really? But you’re a Christian. Isn’t that a contradiction?”

“Heavens no. My agnosticism simply asserts that I don’t *know*. But Christians have asserted that from the moment that Jesus said, *blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed*. It’s not knowledge that drives Christians, it’s faith. I hope you see now that agnosticism is a poor excuse to disbelieve. If you’re going to disbelieve, at least be honest about it. Be an atheist. But don’t use agnosticism as your reason. I accept that you don’t *know*, neither do I. But that’s not the issue. The issue is, in *spite* of your not knowing, do you *believe*? And my answer for myself is: Yes, I believe and I live by faith, not knowledge. And that means that I am, by definition, an agnostic. A *believing* agnostic to be sure, but an agnostic just the same. That is: I accept that I do not know, but I believe anyway. That is called faith. And I am philosophically comfortable with that because reasonable evidence abounds. So I’m asking you, Bertrand, in spite of your agnosticism (which truthfully we all are), are you willing to search for reasonable evidence? Not proof, but evidence. And can you at last give faith a chance and allow yourself to believe what that evidence suggests?”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Good. Let’s compare our calendars.”

[6] CONCLUSION

In my church, it was common (in the 1960s when I was a kid) to hear people say, “I know beyond the shadow of a doubt.” But those words have fallen out of favor; I don’t hear people say that so much anymore. A few do and I don’t doubt them, but not many. I have never spoken those words, not even once, in my entire life.

I think that people are more realistic these days, and more comfortable with their mere faith, less demanding of God, and less willing to claim to know what they merely believe. Claiming a special knowledge that deep down you know you do not have is dangerous because one day you may have to face the reality that you don’t know what you have always claimed to know and in despair walk away from it all. Much better is to accept the truth that you do have and be loyal to that all your life.

I’m saying all this not to discourage you but to encourage you. You have faith? And maybe a weak faith? And that’s all you have? Then you’re in a very blessed position. Yes, there are people who *know*. Thomas *knew*. But that is not a requirement for salvation. If you believe, and are willing to live by that belief, you have all you *need*. The Bible nowhere demands that you know, only that you believe: *whosoever believeth on him shall not perish...*

You should never say, “Because I don’t *know*, I won’t *believe*.” Trust your faith. Most of what we know or think we know is just belief anyway, like for example: love. You think you know what love is? If so, you’re a better person than me because I have no clue. Yet I live every minute of my life for it and the woman I share it with. To manage life is to trust. Fortunately, most of what we believe really is true and reliable as we eventually find out. Like for instance, I *believe* I will wake up tomorrow morning. I might not, but I’m willing to believe I will, and believe it enough to commit today to it.

[7] POP QUIZ FOR EXTRA CREDIT (MORMONS ONLY)

What is the First Principle of the Gospel? Go on, say it. If you said “faith,” you’d be entirely ... *wrong!* Surprise! Then what is it? Well, look it up — the Fourth Article of Faith. What does it say? No, really. Take a minute and look it up. I’ll wait.

Okay. Do you have it now? Good. Let’s see.

The Fourth Article of Faith says that the first principle of the gospel is not Faith but is Faith *in the Lord Jesus Christ*. Faith as a stand-alone principle does little good. It can, as I said, cause you to worship a rock, and that’s not good at all. To do real good, faith must be directed to the right person, the one man who is the source of all power who loves you and can save you.

Am I just being picky? Well, that’s for you to decide. But now you know.