

Defending the Faith: Is faith irrational?

By [Daniel Peterson](#), For the Deseret News
Published: Wednesday, Jan. 27 2016 5:00 a.m. MST

Is faith irrational? Is it merely wishful thinking, believing something for which we have no solid grounds?

Many skeptics insist that religious faith violates reason. Yet that's not the nature of the faith described in the scriptures. Jesus, for example, didn't invite his audiences to believe in him without reason, but appealed (among other things) to his own miracles and good deeds: "Though ye believe not me," he said, "believe the works" ([John 10:38](#)). "Jesus of Nazareth," the apostle Peter told his listeners at Pentecost, was "a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs" ([Acts 2:22](#)). The evangelist Luke mentioned "many infallible proofs" of Christ's resurrection experienced by numerous eyewitnesses ([Acts 1:3](#)). Writing to the Romans, the apostle Paul cited the evidence found in nature: "For since the creation of the world," he wrote, "God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20, New International Version).

What is faith? Another way of translating the Greek word in the New Testament that's typically rendered as "faith" would be "trust." Or, perhaps, "confidence." (Please see my earlier articles on this topic titled "[What exactly does 'faith' mean? Trust removes misunderstanding](#)" and "[Critics misunderstand the nature of faith](#)."") It's useful to keep these other translations in mind because faith, trust or confidence isn't solely a religious phenomenon. In fact, in ordinary daily life, those terms are most commonly used for interpersonal earthly relationships, as well as for our dependence on processes, machines, tools and other human creations. And we can learn quite a bit about the nature of even religious faith from considering such usage.

For instance, a baseball manager who puts his faith in an ace relief pitcher at the pivotal moment of a championship game, or in a player with a high batting average, isn't being irrational. Parents who entrust their children to a baby sitter with whom they're well-acquainted aren't forsaking reason.

A couple exchanging wedding vows are expressing trust in each other. They're making a leap of faith. Of course, their faith plainly exceeds the evidence — after all, their hoped-for happily-ever-after hasn't actually happened yet — and goes well beyond demonstrable proof. But it's not necessarily unreasonable, illogical or irrational.

Astronauts waiting for liftoff atop an enormous rocket may have a fairly good idea of how their vehicle is supposed to work and why, but they must trust those who built it and the folks at Mission Control who're doing the countdown. They cannot possibly have built or even inspected everything personally.

A sailor on a submarine commits himself to the crushing pressures of the sea's depths based on confidence in his captain, the expertise of those who designed and constructed the vessel, its navigational systems, the integrity of its hull, and the training and competence and goodwill of his fellow crew members. He has no hard proof that everything is perfect, but he doesn't do so whimsically, recklessly or irrationally.

The opposite of "reason" isn't "trust," "confidence" or "faith." It's "irrationality." The opposite of "faith" isn't "reason." It's "disbelief" or "lack of trust." Trust or confidence isn't typically something that's given purely at random, without reason, irrationally.

Faith or trust can be rational or not or somewhere in between. Confidence can be well-placed or misplaced. Plainly, though, it isn't intrinsically irrational. And, as we gain positive experience with the person or object we've trusted, our confidence approaches certainty. Our faith grows. As Ernest Hemingway once remarked, "The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them."

And faith or trust is typically expressed in action. (In this sense, the traditional opposition of faith to works is misconceived.) Parents, trusting in the baby sitter, leave for their play. Astronauts, confident in their support personnel, strap themselves into their seats for launch. A department is entrusted to a new and, by definition, untested vice president. A father hands the car keys to his teenage daughter. A submarine's crew seals the hatches and prepares to dive.

We live by faith. It cannot be otherwise. A world in which we trusted nobody and relied on nothing without complete advance proof, beyond reasonable doubt, is virtually inconceivable and would be quite unlivable. We would be paralyzed. And if that's so in daily life, it's surely true in much larger matters — where things are neither easily checked nor easily proved.

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