

When Faith Should Not Be Blind by Pastor Marty

If you know me, you probably are aware that I consider the *Stargate* franchise to be one of the best science fiction series in recent history. Between the three series, it ran for more than ten years. The basic premise of the SG-1 series can be summed up with the phrase “rejecting false gods.” Whether their enemy was the Goa’uld or the Ori, the issue was the same: advanced beings claiming to be all-powerful gods. This almost always included enslaving others, some as workers and some as warriors. Of course, there were some good advanced beings in the show, such as Thor and Oma Desala along with the Asgard, Tollan, Nox, and Tok’ra. However, the focus was defeating the bad guys. What is significant about both the Goa’uld and the Ori is that just masquerading as omnipotent gods wasn’t sufficient for them: they also required blind obedience, unerring devotion, and absolute worship. As can be imagined, for this is almost always the formula for oppression, they incorporated a class-type system where a group of warriors—the Jaffa or the Priors—ruled over the common people. The thing I like most about the series is that the main weapon used to defeat the “false gods” was the simple truth of who and what these beings really were. In a very real sense, it was the truth that set them free. Even outside of a biblical context, truth is inherently liberating

Even outside of a spiritual and biblical context, the truth is inherently liberating.

While thinking about the series, I began to notice some clear similarities between the humans who were enslaved by these false gods and the people of Israel. Jesus described them as being oppressed and lost like “sheep without a shepherd.” Of course, this was not because they were worshiping a false god, for they had given up idol worship by that time. They knew

they were only to worship the God of Israel, the I-AM-THAT-I-AM. However, they were under bondage to extensive laws and punishments by religious rulers, who were somewhat like the “warriors” on the show. I am not talking about the Romans here as much as the Pharisees and Sadducees. They ruled by demanding absolute obedience to hundreds of rules and regulations, many of which were manmade and not from God. However, even their obedience to those things commanded by God had become a type of legalistic bondage. Before we blame those leaders, though, we need to recognize that this problem did not start in Jesus’ time; many of the Old Testament prophets decried the same thing, going all the way back to the kings of Israel: some of the people were oppressed while corrupt rulers benefited at their expense. Even when Israel did not worship false gods, their worship could easily become false.

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It is possible to argue that the people of Israel WERE worshiping a false god at these times because they had a concept of God that was significantly different than who He really was. In other words, they had the facts straight about the God of Abraham, Moses, and David, but they were so incorrect about His nature and His character that they were essentially worshiping some other god. Although there is some truth to that, I want to focus more on the nature of their worship that often prevented them from realizing their mistake. We know they had some erroneous beliefs because they did not immediately recognize Jesus for who He was. The crowds were amazed at His teachings but flocked to Him to hear Him describe the true nature of God in terms they understood; at the same time, most of the rulers hated Him

because they did not like what He was saying. He was challenging the status quo of the ruling class when it came to how they worship God.

The rulers hated Jesus because He was challenging the status quo of their beliefs.

Regrettably, one issue that existed in Old Testament times, continued through Jesus' time, and still persists in some churches today is the perception that God wants blind obedience and devotion. While it is true that God calls us to obedience and devotion, He does not want it to be "blind" because that is not real faith. When rulers (or leaders) demand blind devotion, it usually means that questions and concerns must be dismissed, ignored, or denied. However, that is not what God asks from us. An excellent example of this is seen in the life of Abraham. God told Abraham he would have a son in his old age. We read that Abraham "believed God" and was credited with being a righteous man. His belief in God's promise was NOT a result of denying the reality of the physical circumstances of his and Sara's age—it was in spite of that reality. Paul tells us clearly that Abraham "contemplated his own body . . . and the deadness of Sara's womb . . . but grew strong in faith." How did he "grow" strong in faith? He looked reality square in the eye, saw the sheer impossibility of having a child, compared all those "facts" with the character and ability of God . . . and believed. This was precisely what God wanted—believing in Him while being fully cognizant and honest about the impractical nature of that belief. He did not want Abraham to believe because he was in denial, for nothing would ultimately be gained that way. Faith has to see clearly to grow, for faith and denial are incompatible.

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Throughout the Old Testament, we see instance after instance where people of faith

first note the cost or difficulty beforehand, and God honors it. Abraham was certainly not in denial about the sin in Sodom when he bargained with God to spare the city—though he clearly underestimated how widespread it actually was—for God told him "the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave" at the outset; God wanted him to know how serious the situation was. Moses told the people of Israel to "look upon" the Egyptian army before they were drowned in the sea; they were to realize how great an enemy was defeated by the hand of God. God knew the twelve spies would see the giants when they went in to check out the promised land; He wanted them to be prepared AND to trust Him to give them victory. David had faced the lion and the bear before he ever faced Goliath; he knew that the danger was real, but he trusted God to empower him. Daniel's friends—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden idol even though they knew it meant being cast into the furnace; they accepted the possibility they would die when they added "even if not" to their statement of faith. Over and over again, people of faith did not refuse to face the situation but instead chose to believe God and trust Him in spite of it. The people who were in denial were the false prophets and the evil kings who repeatedly refused to accept the warnings of pending invasion, judgment, and destruction until it came on them unaware. Instead of enabling and growing an atmosphere of faith, denial actually blinds people to truth.

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One example of an Old Testament person who certainly was NOT in denial is Job. With all the trouble that came upon him, there was no way he could be in denial about it. We also find that Job was not interested in obedience and devotion that was blind. He was

willing to ask questions about all the things going on with him and around him. He argued with those who tried to give “pat” answers, and he was willing to ask questions of God. He had serious issues with everything that was going on in his life. However, he held steadfast to his integrity as well as his trust in God. When his wife told him to give up and curse God, he rebuked her for being foolish, and when his friends blamed him for everything, he refuted their claims. Of course, we know that Job pushed the envelope a bit too far, for we see God Himself speaking to Job out of a tornado to rebuke, challenge, and correct him concerning some of his assumptions; nevertheless, God said that Job had “spoken rightly” about Him. This is an important point: God does not mind our asking questions and “arguing our case before Him.” Job himself had said, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him.” In other words, Job had faith even while he accepted that he might not come out of this trial in one piece—but he also did not accept it all lying down. God does not want His children to accept passively everything that happens to come upon them.

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In our culture, there are numerous attacks against our faith in God. They arise from numerous possible sources, such as the current PC culture, science, psychology, education, the media, and other religions. However, along with attacks, there are also serious questions that society asks the Church, related to marriage and family, gender and identity, sexuality and morality, creation and evolution, and a multitude of others. It will not suffice to give an answer akin to a parental favorite and just say, “Because God said so!” If we want to provide thoughtful and insightful answers to these questions, we must be able to recognize all the issues and challenges. We may be

confident that we are more than just intelligent monkeys, but the t-shirt response of “I’m not descended from a monkey, but you might be” is probably not going to convince anyone of the importance of Pauline theology. God never does or says anything arbitrarily; all of His laws, statements, and actions are connected to His character and the way He made the world to operate. We are told to study and know God’s Word so we will be well-informed and able to not only defend what we believe but also explain it to others. In order to do so, we have to be willing to listen to what others have to say and develop an intelligent response.

We must listen to what others are saying before we can respond to it intelligently.

Of course, this requires a great deal of discernment. As discussed in prior newsletters, we need to avoid the trap of dialogue with the devil. Evil has a way of presenting the most obvious and blatant lies as truth; otherwise, it would have been impossible to convince a third of the celestial beings to join in a rebellion against God. We need to recognize when someone is asking an honest question compared to tempting us into argument. If Jesus Himself at times refused to give into questions elicited solely for the purpose of debate, we should not consider ourselves wiser than Him. When He did respond, the very first thing He did was correct the context of the question. Like the serpent in Eden, the world has become exceptionally skilled at framing their questions to make it almost impossible to disagree with their position without appearing to be hateful or ignorant; it takes supernatural wisdom to cut through that hazy cloud and to reframe the subject appropriately. An example of this is when the Pharisees challenged Jesus on His practice of doing healing on the Sabbath. Instead of debating them, he reframed their question by pointing out their own choices and then asking if people are more or less valuable

than beasts of burden. He avoided the traps by identifying the fallacy inherent in the questions.

Jesus avoided his opponents' traps by identifying the inherent fallacies in them.

One contemporary example of this type of contextualizing is seen in the whole abortion debate. In the specific “pro-choice” vs “pro-life” terminology, each side tries to frame the issue in a specific context: the “choice” side attempts to base the entire question in a way that forces the opposition to somehow be against freedom and rights; on the other side, the “life” side attempts to argue that dissenting is essentially a vote for legalized murder. In this example, the question is contextualized in a way that makes it almost impossible to give any input on either side without emotionalizing the debate. This is precisely what the devil does because it clouds the real issue. In Jesus’ time, a similar debate raged over the question of when a man could divorce his wife. Instead of just answering the question that was posed to Him, Jesus does what nobody expected: instead of referencing parts of the Mosaic law, He reframed the entire debate by going back to the creation account in Genesis. By returning to the primary foundation of when God made man and woman, He was able to address the core of the issue and give a conclusive answer. This is what is missing in a great deal of our discussions today—the ability to identify the core of the issue. However, the type of response Jesus gave is neither easy nor simple, for it requires us to have an extremely comprehensive knowledge of biblical theology and the nature of ultimate reality. Unless we have already spent time learning to recognize how all of God’s laws fit together and relate to His character and the nature of the world that He created, we will only be able to respond to these questions with things we have heard.

Until we recognize how everything fits together, we will only be repeating words.

There is another way blindness hinders real faith from growing: it minimizes personal responsibility. Blind obedience or devotion has a tendency to ignore how choices affect others. Of course, God is the primary relationship in all our lives, so we put Him first in everything; however, this does not mean we should ignore others. If we do not notice how our actions affect people around us, we miss opportunities to see other choices and alternatives. A clear example of this is seen in Judges 11. The Holy Spirit had come on Jephthah to empower him to deliver Israel. In a moment of blind devotion, he vowed to “sacrifice whatever first comes out of the door of my house when I return.” There is little chance it would be a goat or a lamb. We cannot be sure what he was thinking, but he certainly was not considering his words with care. Had he stopped to think about his desire to proclaim a holy vow to God, he would have remembered how God condemned the nations who practiced human sacrifice—especially the ones that worshipped Molech, the idol god who demanded child sacrifice. If he had considered his words beforehand, he might have instead done what Hannah did: devote whatever came out of his house to a life of service to the Lord. His rashness led him to do what God specifically forbid His people to do in the law (Deut 12, 18).

Blind devotion can actually lead us to do those things God commands us not to do.

Having our eyes open to the difficulties and circumstances around us means we will be able to recognize how an answer to a question can be more difficult—or simpler and easier—than we may realize. When our eyes are open to those around us, we are less likely to judge them and place demands on them. Jesus called the Pharisees and Sadducees “blind guides of the blind” because they could no longer see the truth standing right in front of them. If we allow ourselves to be blind in our relationship with Him, we may potentially miss what He is doing.