

Title: Stepping Out Of The Boat- Faith 2

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Text: Matthew 14:22-32

Bill Davis in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* creates a scenario to illustrate what it means to believe in something supernatural and to take the risks of faith. He asks the reader to imagine relaxing at home alone when a strange but wonderful being appears before you. It has the general appearance of a human; the body and face are translucent, maybe with a faint blue aura. It tells you it's from another kind of world, and you have been selected for something special. In thirty days you'll have a fatal heart attack. But you can avoid that if you follow instructions. On the morning before that fateful day you are to go to roof of certain tall building and jump off. Mid-air you will be transformed into a similar being, and you will enjoy a wonderful existence beyond your imagination. Then it pauses, smiles, and asks "Questions? You would probably say you want proof. So it responds by offering to perform any kind of feat or sign you want. You say "Make me float." Done. You lift off the floor and hover for a moment, then float back down. But you want one more, like Gideon in the Old Testament. So you say "Make my left arm disappear." Done. Your left arm is totally gone. You feel the stump, mystified. Then the mysterious being disappears. Over the next few days you have doubts, but you keep thinking about what the being said. If you don't do what it said you risk that fatal heart attack. If you obey, and it's a hoax, you'll also die. So what do you do?

The reason behind this scenario is belief in Jesus Christ is much the same, except it is not based on a personal encounter. It relies on the written testimony traditionally from two of Jesus' disciples, one a companion of a late-comer who did not know Jesus personally (except in a claimed vision) and the fourth from a companion of Paul, Barnabas and later Peter. But the Gospels offer essentially the same kind of message, that Jesus was not of this world, but God come in the flesh. He did miracles, like healing cripples, restoring sight to the blind, and casting out demons. He fed thousands with a boy's lunch, calmed storms at sea, and raised the dead. Then after being killed for no crimes at all, he rose from the dead, spent some time with his followers and then they watched him rise into the air and disappear.

It seems that few Christians today think or talk in depth about their faith. Most do not read very much. Or talk with others about their life experiences and how faith is involved. How many husbands and wives ask each other to explain their belief in God? Or their questions about whether God answers our prayers? Nearly everyone relies totally on what his or her minister teachings from the pulpit, with no questions as the validity of a denominational slant or tradition. We might ask many questions internally, but we don't bring them up to others for fear of appearing faithless. And we do not weigh up risks of faith.

We live world of risks. On the one hand, we don't like taking chances. We buy insurance for home, car, and even our lives. We buckle up when drive. We do everything to protect our material possessions and cling to life itself. At the same time we take many risks, like driving on the freeway, flying in plane, boarding a cruise ship. Taking a job is a risk, or hiring someone else if you are a manager or owner of a business. Starting a business, borrowing money, even a home mortgage is a risk. Marriage is a risk. Having children is a huge risk. We worry about whether each is born "normal," and then worry that grow up healthy, happy, and successful. Enormous risks at every turn. Yet most people accept these risks. They are all risks worth taking. So, it would seem that somehow, deep inside us, we do weigh up circumstances to determine whether certain risks are worth taking.

The text Matthew 14:22-32 presents an intriguing story of the test of Simon Peter's faith when he took a risk by stepping out of the boat. Simon is one of the favorite characters in the New Testament, I suspect because more is said about him to make him familiar to us. But I suspect we connect with him because he is more like ourselves. He is famous for his impetuous nature, making bold pledges beyond his ability to follow through. Here he may be braver than most of us in his eagerness to go where Jesus is. He saw Jesus walking on water and heard the invitation to join him. He stepped out and walked. But this too demonstrates his impulsiveness, his reckless impetuosity, his acting before thinking. For once he was out of the boat, he realized where he was and what he was doing and doubt displaced his courage. Most ministers explain this as faith diminished by distraction. Clearly the power resided not in himself but in Jesus, but it relied upon his focused trust, his faith in Jesus. When his eyes left Jesus and turned to the wind, water and waves, he sank.

As before, there's a practical lesson for you and me about meaning of faith, risks, leaps of faith. What do we believe our faith calls us to do? What risks involved and are they risk worth taking? Theologians have weighed up this sort of dilemma for centuries. Many Christians run terrified from the word "theologian" because some preachers say they talk in such elevated terminology they have no practical relevance. Some even being demonize them as enemies of Christ. Some call them athiests. **Blaise Pascal** (French mathematician/theologian) in mid 1600s (died at 39) spoke of the "gambit" (wager) of faith, suggesting that believing less risk than not to believe. Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher of 1800s spoke about a "qualitative leap" (called leap of faith). He was critical of those who talk about religion all day without ever doing anything, and he spoke against external shows and opinions about religion void of thought. But bottom line, he said that faith is a leap into the unknown.

Some Christians react to that too, because of the words *I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day* (2 Timothy 1:12). But this famous quote speaks of a confidence that results from faith and conviction, and it should not be twisted to mean "knowledge" in direct sense. We know God through life evidences and resulting belief (as the illustration above), but it is not knowledge.

I have a little dog named Shasta. She's a small standard poodle, about 35 pounds, and incredible smart. Our friends used to ask when we planned in enrolling her in college. But at age six Shasta developed glaucoma, and eventually we reluctantly complied with the vet's suggestion to remove her left eye with the understanding that in a year or so she would lose sight in the other also. That indeed happened. I was heart-sore for her plight and my wife and I were faced with the challenge of caring for a blind dog. But the vet told use that Shasta would adjust faster and better than we would and he was right. We watched as she worked her way through the house memorizing doors and placement of furniture. And we were amazed to see how quickly she learned to chase a bouncing tennis ball by smell and sound. Obviously it was a strange and challenging new life for her, but she faced it with courage. She continued to sleep on our bed, and in the morning with my hand on her shoulders she would make a "leap of faith" down to the floor eager to start her day. The touch of my hand assured her that while she could not see, she was in the care of someone she trusted to know the way and guide her footsteps.

While we might not care for the expression "leap of faith" in many ways our lives are about taking risks to be what we want to be and accomplish what we want to accomplish. Sometimes doing that requires an enormous leap of faith. I've always though it odd that people will borrow money to buy a house, a new car, do repairs, start a business. But we are reluctant to back a church decision to borrow money, when no one person is legally liable for that debt. What's up with that? I truly don't understand.

Even more faith is required for how we live our lives in Christian faith, and how we work together to accomplish what we believe to be the will of God. There are many occasions to do what we haven't done before, to step out of our comfort zone, to run risks of failure. And there are plenty of occasions when we think "Oh no, what if I fail?" "What if I trust this person and she lets me down?" "What if we give money to help this guy and he turns out to be an addict?" Or when we as a congregation of Christians try to make decisions to enhance our work in this place by launching a new program, building a new facility, or supporting a new ministry. Our heads and hearts are invaded by doubt. "What if we do this and the church doesn't grow? Who'll make the payments? What if we try and fail? We will have wasted the lord's money."

We all remember the parable Jesus told of called "The Talents." Three servants given sums of money to invest on behalf of the master while he was away. The one that proved useless was the conservative and frugile servant who buried the talent out of fear of failure. Faith is not afraid to try. It takes risks hoping for a positive result.

Thus the basic call of Christian is simple: To live by higher principles and values. To trust God rather than wealth, political power. To reach out to people with love, kindness, respect. To give generously to make good happen. To stand up for principles of justice as oppose to hatred and prejudice. There is not much risk in doing that. Of course, few of us ever have to make a qualitative leap of faith. Our risks are relatively safe. But now and then believers have opportunities to do something extraordinary. To stick their necks out and, take risks, push boundaries, make or allow changes to effect better results than ever before. That might involve standing for underdog, trusting someone needing a second chance, or step into a leadership role for the first time. Extra commitment of time or money. Here is where many Christians like Peter begin to sink. It is easy for people to join a big corporate church that already has all the facilities. But think of the thousands of small churches starting in strip shopping center, then one day "let's build." That is a huge step, a leap of faith.

Most churches have lots of people who want to ride in the boat, if someone else will paddle and someone else will navigate, and someone else will steer. Some want to sit at the back and grip the tiller to make sure the

boat does not change course. The comparisons are rather funny, don't you think? But few are willing to step out of the boat and try to walk on water.

The big question is "Am I committed to follow through with the principles of my faith?" When you say "I believe. . ." Do you mean you're committed to playing it safe, following a comfortable routine, doing what you enjoy and avoiding what might be challenging or unpleasant? Or are you prepared to shoulder the risks of faith? Are you committed to offering self on the altar of calling and service, using time, talent and treasure to make something good happen in name of Jesus Christ? Do you want to hunker down in dark safety of the hull? Or do you want to step out of the boat and walk on water with the Lord?