

Faith to Read Nietzsche

Growing up, if I'd been asked what name I most associated with atheism and opposition to Christianity, I probably would've answered 'Nietzsche.' I didn't know much about Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, but I knew that he was an eloquent opponent of Christianity who famously proclaimed that God was dead. Consequently, I avoided his writings, and tried not to think about him.

Not everyone was afraid to think about Nietzsche. Someone made a bumper sticker (it's a meme, now). It says, "God is dead" — Nietzsche, 1883. "Nietzsche is dead" — God, 1900." As a God-loving, Nietzsche-fearing teenager, I was a fan of the bumper sticker. I thought it was hilarious and valid.

Looking back, I think avoiding Nietzsche and making memes about him were both bad ideas. I also think they represent two kinds of unfortunate responses to our faith being threatened.

Running away is an understandable, but counterproductive response to doubt. Understandable, because my whole world is built on a foundation of faith in Jesus, and a whole world is a lot to lose. It's only natural for me to want to run.

And running works pretty well for scary stuff like cliffs, fires and (slow) bears. As long as you're faster than the thing you fear, you might as well go for it. But fear and doubt exist in your mind and heart, so avoidance is a doomed strategy. As doubt goes unaddressed, it intensifies, and eventually we can't escape. The more I avoid my doubts, the scarier they become.

In my experience, facing my fears and doubts lets me lay them to rest. I can either answer them, or decide whether not knowing the answer is a good reason to stop following Jesus. So far, it never has been. Facing our doubt can also build our faith—every doubt we overcome is a test our faith has passed. They allow us to face future questions with a quiet confidence, born from experience, that if God is who He says he is he will carry us through our doubts.

The second problematic response is to fight poorly—with rude jokes, false facts, half-truths and shoddily-constructed arguments. Once, as a 14-year old, I joined a message-board on a Christian website and started an argument with an atheist. I'd read two books on apologetics, so I felt ready to prove that atheism was an intellectually bankrupt approach to reality. I went in with a "Nietzsche is dead"-type attitude, and

I got thrashed within an inch of my faith.

This experience (eventually) taught me an important lesson. Yes, we need to face our doubts, but we also need to take them seriously, and investigate them honestly, and thoroughly. As much as I needed to face my fear of Nietzsche, there were moments in my life when reading his books would not have been wise.

How do we approach doubt head-on, but prudently? Here are some things that have helped me:

First, my community. When doubt became a daily reality for me in my teen years, I spoke to my parents and pastors.

They were instrumental in helping me navigate the moments when my worldview was hanging by a thread.

Second, praying, reading scripture, and reflecting on moments when I saw God work. It might seem trite, and when you're not sure there's anyone there to pray to, it all feels silly.

But keeping the lines of communication open and absorbing truth are invaluable. In some of my darkest moments, I clung to memories of God at work—friends who had cancer on Friday, but not Monday. A girl who was deaf, then wasn't. There were explanations besides God—but not good ones.

Third; studying. Browsing two books on apologetics didn't prepare me to conquer atheists online, but apologetic resources were vital in reassuring me that my faith was intellectually viable. They also introduced me to forms of logic and argumentation that helped me to develop my own ideas, responses, and arguments about faith.

When I got around to reading Nietzsche, after years of struggling with doubt, he turned out not to be the invincible faith-killer I spent my teen years fleeing. He was brilliant and challenging, and I had to read and respond carefully. But after years of support and conversations with trusted friends, praying, and studying, I discovered that I was no longer afraid.

This is not nearly all there is to say about doubt, or about defending our faith against objections. For many people (including me), it's a journey of years. The things that have helped me may not even be the same things that help you. But I do know that running from doubt and not taking it seriously will never help. Finally, take heart: God has carried me, loved me and used me for His kingdom even in my darkest uncertainty. And as He has for me, I trust He will for you.

