

## Faith and Pascal's Wager – By Thailer Jimerson

Have you ever heard of Pascal's Wager? It's a thought experiment (or logical process) that originates with the well-known French mathematician Blaise Pascal. As a Christian philosopher, Pascal posited that the logical choice was faith in God versus disbelief. Here's how it goes. First, you have two choices in this life: Christianity and atheism. And you have four possible outcomes based on those choices: 1) You wager for God and Christianity proves to be true; 2) You wager for God but atheism proves to be true; 3) You don't wager for God but Christianity proves to be true; 4) You don't wager for God and atheism proves to be true.

Those are the four options, and Pascal reasons that *you actually lose less if you believe in God*. "If you believe and obey God in this life only to find he doesn't exist – you only have a finite loss. But if you don't believe and obey God and find out he does exist – you'll suffer infinite loss," (Timothy Keller), i.e. *if God isn't real, Christians have wasted their lives; but if God is, then atheists have wasted their eternity*.

In Pascal's own words, though, to waste one's existence believing in the Christian faith actually doesn't waste an existence at all. He says, "What harm will come to you from taking this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend. It is, of course, true: you will not take part in corrupt pleasure, in glory, in the pleasure of high living. But will you not have others? I tell you that you will win thereby in this life" (Pascal, after Michael Rota). You'll lead a better life for following Christianity anyway, he reasons. And, socially speaking, he's right! "As Duke University's Harold Koenig and colleagues have shown, those actively practicing a religion are more likely to have stable families, higher self-esteem, a richer social life, greater degrees of optimism and hope, and a greater sense of meaning and purpose. Other researches have shown that religious persons also tend to live somewhat longer and give more to charitable causes" (CTmag, Michael Rota, *The Ultimate Wager*).

Now, here's the thing. Yes, I believe Pascal's wager is just as relevant today for our thinking – but I don't believe one should follow Jesus because of it. See, in the way the New Testament explains faith, following Jesus is about much more than weighing the pros and cons and seeking an earthly benefit. Following Jesus comes as a result of having our hearts enlightened to perceive the love of God for us, to see the glory of the creator God in the face of Christ our Lord, to realize he is the living embodiment of truth and to follow him because we long for the truth. And following Jesus and living in holiness doesn't always reap (and I speak in worldly standards) earthly benefits. Sometimes, Jesus says, living in his light means we're going to be around a lot of those who hate the light because they do their works in darkness; sometimes it means we'll reap persecution for our choices to live in truth. And biblical faith is the choice to follow Jesus in spite of all of that – to follow Jesus because he is the only way.