

## **SHARP FAITH**

### **FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T**

*This 5-week course explores the emotional, intellectual, and deeply human dimensions of Christian belief, inspired by Francis Spufford's bold and unconventional book *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*.*

*Rather than offering a traditional defense of doctrine, Spufford focuses on the felt experience of faith—its emotional weight, moral complexity, and the honest recognition of human failure.*

*Through guided readings and discussions, we'll examine themes like belief as emotional truth, the raw demands of love and grace, the role of power and failure in the Church, and why Jesus remains the theological and emotional center of the Christian story.*

#### **The Author**

*Francis Spufford is a British writer and former atheist who returned to Christian faith as an adult. Known for his work across genres—from history to fiction—Spufford brings a literary, humorous, and deeply honest voice to the conversation around belief in the modern world. *Unapologetic* is both personal and provocative, offering a fresh way to talk about Christianity for those who are skeptical of traditional religious language but still hungry for meaning.*

### **LOVE, HOPE, AND THE DEFIANT STORY OF GRACE (5)**

1. Early on I compared beginning to believe to falling in love, and the way that faith settles down in a life is also very like the way that the first dizzy-intense phase of attraction settles (if it does) into a relationship.
  - 1.1. Rapture develops into routine, a process which keeps its customary doubleness where religion is concerned.
  - 1.2. It's both loss and gain together, with excitement dwindling and trust growing; like all human ties, it constricts at the same time as it supports, ruling out other choices by the very act of being a choice.
  - 1.3. And so as with any commitment, there are times when you notice the limit on your theoretical freedom more than you feel what the attachment is giving you, and then it tends to be habit, or the awareness of a promise given, that keeps you trying.
  - 1.4. God makes an elusive lover. (206)
2. You discover that repetition itself, curiously, is not the enemy of spontaneity, but maybe even its enabler. Saying the same prayers again and again, pacing your body again and again through the set movements of faith, somehow helps keep the door ajar through which He may come. (208)
3. You get used to the way the human landscape looks from there: reoriented, reorganized, different.
  - 3.1. We are supposed to look for Him in each other's faces, and to love specifically, concretely, with the largest and most generous and of course most curious sense of the other we can possibly manage.

- 3.2. On the other hand [...] neither God's love for us nor ours for God is supposed to displace other loves. It is supposed, in fact, to encourage and even sanctify them. (208)
  - 3.3. It is not always clear how though, in a given situation, you are supposed to try to be loving. Since Christianity isn't one of the law religions, it doesn't furnish you with a list of rules. It offers instead the impossible ideal of valuing other people as absolutely as you value yourself, which does not translate straightforwardly into a code of behavior. (210)
  - 3.4. And then, when is enough love enough? Need is endless, let alone want, and no signal is ever going to come telling you that the world is satisfied now, and you may stop with the job of love done; yet you are finite, and so are your resources of time and emotion, and presumably you are not supposed to immolate yourself, to damage yourself, to let the pile of need bury you. (212)
- 4. The point of Christianity is not that it produces virtue. It does, I suppose, have one advantage when it comes to doing good, in that your advance certainty, as a Christian, that you're going to fail at goodness provides a kind of assurance that goodness is worth trying independently of results. (212)
- 5. Politics
  - 5.1. Historically, there is no such thing as a single "Christian" politics, and there couldn't be. (215)
  - 5.2. If you have signed up for the redeeming love of God, you don't-you really don't-have to sign up too for low taxes, creationism, gun ownership, the death penalty, closing abortion clinics, climate change denial and grotesque economic inequality. You are entirely at liberty to believe that the kingdom would be better served by social justice, redistributive taxation, feminism, gay rights and excellent public transport. (215)
  - 5.3. On the other hand, what you can't do, no matter how tempting, is to push wholly away from you those who do their Christianity very differently. (215)
  - 5.4. [And yet] the map of Christian possibilities has edges. There are some forms of politics, therefore, that just aren't open to you as a Christian, because they're off the edge of the older map. They depend on assumptions that are fundamentally incompatible with the Christian essentials, however freely and widely you interpret them.
  - 5.5. For example. You can't be a Christian and hold that the ends justify the means. You may not declare it to be a virtue to inflict suffering so that good may come of it: that's flat-out incompatible with the commandment to love, and its inverse, the prohibition on treating people as instruments or conveniences or objects. (217)
- 6. It would be nice if people were to understand that science is a special exercise in perceiving the world without metaphor, and that, powerful though it is, it doesn't function as a guide to those very large aspects of experience that can't be perceived except through metaphor. It would be nice if people saw that the world cannot be disenchanted, and that the choice before us is really a choice of enchantments. (218)

7. What I do know is that, when I am lucky, when I have managed to pay attention, when for once I have hushed my noise for a little while, it can feel as if there is [a God]. And so it makes emotional sense to proceed as if He's there; to dare the conditional. (218)

## KEY IDEAS OF THE BOOK

1. Faith begins in emotion and experience, not just intellectual assent.

“It is the feelings that are primary. I assent to the ideas because I have the feelings; I don’t have the feelings because I’ve assented to the ideas.”  
— *Unapologetic*, p. 19
2. Rather than glossing over guilt, sin, or failure, Christianity names and confronts them—acknowledging that everyone fails, and that grace addresses us as we truly are, not as we pretend to be.

“Taking the things people do wrong seriously is part of taking them seriously.”  
— *Unapologetic*, p. 42
3. The Christian story doesn’t “solve” suffering but offers companionship and hope in the midst of it. God doesn’t explain Himself—He shares in our pain.

“A consolation you could trust would be one that acknowledged the difficult stuff... and then found you grounds for hope in spite of it.”  
— *Unapologetic*, p. 14

“We don’t ask for a creator who can explain Himself. We ask for a friend in time of grief.”  
— *Unapologetic*, p. 105
4. Jesus is not simply a “moral teacher,” myth, or tragic hero. His story is unique: it claims that God entered ordinary history, suffered obscurely, and brought radical hope—not as fantasy, but in gritty human terms.

“The story is about God coming into what’s ordinary, and changing it.”  
— *Unapologetic*, p. 160
5. The Church is a mess—divided, sinful, compromised—but God works through it anyway. We trust God, not the Church’s performance, and remain committed to its mission because of Him.

“We don’t, in fact, believe the church is precious because it is good or does good or because it may do good in future. We care about its behavior, but we don’t believe that its muddled and sometimes awful record is the only truth about it.”  
— *Unapologetic*, p. 188
6. Christian faith must always critique power—even when Christians hold it. It should not sanctify the status quo but challenge injustice, including within the Church itself.

“We are supposed to be on the side of goodness in the sense that we need it, not that we are it.”  
— *Unapologetic*, p. 188
7. Christianity refuses to be a religion of balance sheets. Grace isn’t earned and doesn’t make moral sense by human standards. It offends fairness because it goes beyond it.

“Something kinder than fairness is, by definition, unfair... once you take grace seriously it immediately threatens to produce scandalous unfairness in human terms.”

— *Unapologetic*, p. 177

8. Christian love doesn't come with clear rules but with a nearly impossible call to value others as deeply as ourselves. It sanctifies rather than replaces other human loves.

“[Christianity] offers the impossible ideal of valuing other people as absolutely as you value yourself.”

— *Unapologetic*, p. 210

9. Faith is like a relationship: initial intensity gives way to committed trust. Repetition, liturgy, and habit are not dead routines—they keep the door open to God's presence.

“Saying the same prayers again and again... somehow helps keep the door ajar through which He may come.”

— *Unapologetic*, p. 208