

The National Presbyterian Church
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GOD: ARE THE ATHEISTS RIGHT?
Romans 1:18-25; Psalm 19:1-6

In our Sunday sermons through the Fall, we're going to be thinking together about a number of provocative questions that many people are asking about religion in general and about Christianity in particular. The reason I know that people are asking these questions is that these are questions which emerge from numerous surveys, especially of younger people, as well as from the topic of books which in recent years have been best sellers in the New York Times bookseller lists. You may or may not have read these books but many, many people have read these books.

Today, as with last Sunday when we began the series, I need to say one thing to clarify what I hope we can accomplish. That is, that in fifteen to twenty minutes each Sunday, there is no way I can cover these topics in any great detail. We're going to be thinking about the existence of God. We're going to be thinking about the authority of the Bible. We're going to be thinking about the nature of salvation. We're going to be thinking a little bit about predestination and the end of the world, and other 'big' topics as well – and any idea that we can cover all of these topics in fifteen to twenty minutes each Sunday is really rather absurd. So what I want to say from the outset is this, that I am interested as much in raising some questions as in giving some answers. I hope along the way I'll say something which is helpful to you which will help you see your way through some of these questions. But sometimes we're going to get to the end and you're going to say, "I'm a little more confused than I was at the beginning." And I'm going to reply, "Well actually I think that's ok." Not that I'm setting out to confuse you, but, actually, if you leave here asking some questions and keeping on asking them, then in a way I've done my job. We've been called to love the Lord our God not only with all of our hearts and souls and strength but we've also been called to love the Lord our God *with our minds*: and to set the mind at work is part of the purpose of the pulpit. So I hope that will happen.

I hope along the way there will be some things that are said that are helpful: but there are going to be times when what I have to say is rather complicated. That's why you should have the sermon notes in the bulletin, and if you 'lose me' in this sermon, then feel free to begin to read the sermon notes instead. The sermon notes are there to help. I'm here to provoke! I'm here, hopefully, to help as well!

So that by way of introduction. And having said that, let's get going with the topic at hand this morning. I want to think together with you about the first religious question of all, the greatest religious question of all, the question which creates religion in the first place – *and that's the question as to whether God exists or not*. After all if God doesn't exist, this whole institution is a complete and utter waste of time. If God doesn't exist, you and I are wasting our time. There are better things for us to be doing and we ought not to be here. So . . . Are the atheists right that God doesn't exist?

It's interesting when you read the Bible: the Bible never ever argues for the existence of God. There are no arguments in the Bible for the existence of God. Not once. The existence of God is simply assumed in the Bible. It is the great assumption on which the Scriptures are based, that God exists! . . . whether it is Genesis 1 (the story of creation), whether it's in Psalms (for example, Psalm 19 which speaks of the creation revealing the presence and splendor of God) or whether it's in the letter of Apostle Paul to the Romans (our second reading in the New Testament). The grand assumption of the Bible is that **God is**.

Remember the very first words of the Bible that we find in Genesis 1? "*In the beginning, God*" That's it. That's the presupposition of the Bible. No argument. God exists! God IS!

Though, of course, as many doubters point out, there are clearly some very good reasons to believe that the presupposition is false, and that God does not exist at all.

Personal Lives and the Impact of Beliefs : The Failings of the Believers. *One of the best arguments for believing that God doesn't exist has to do, unfortunately, with people like you and me.* It is the terrible witness to God that those who claim to be followers of God have demonstrated over the centuries when it comes to declaring why it's important to believe in God. Go back over history and you've got one religious war after another. You've got religious hypocrisy here, there and everywhere. You've got Catholics fighting Protestants and Protestants

Catholics. You've got Shia fighting Sunni and Sunni fighting Shia. You've got crusades and jihads of one kind or another. And you've got sexual scandals which keep on rocking the church left, right and center. In fact, in the past twenty-five or thirty years or so, the frequency with which this has happened has been absolutely staggering, and in itself is scandalous.

Surely, it is no wonder that people see churches and they drive by them again and again and they ignore religion in droves. They pass by churches like ours without a second thought. Jesus, if you remember said this in John's gospel (13:35). He said, "*By this, all people will know that you are my disciples,*" [He might as well have said, "*All people will know that you are my disciples and that I am the Son of God and that there is a God who is worth giving your life to you. All people will know that there is a God worth giving your life to if you love one another.*" If the world can see that, they will know! And if the world cannot see that, they won't know. It's a great burden placed on you and me, and the sad truth, overall, is that we believers, generally haven't done very well.

- *We haven't done very well on the one hand because we've been too lukewarm or tepid.* We have one foot in with God and one foot in with the world. Our commitment is no stronger than it was in Sunday school. We have not used our hearts and souls and minds and strength to follow God. We've used a little bit, but not much, and we need to remember those hard words of Jesus (in Revelation 3:16), when he looks at the church and says, "*You are neither hot nor cold. You are lukewarm. Therefore, I will spew you out of my mouth.*" Christ has no passion for those who are not passionate for God! And we need to take this seriously and decide whether our witness and our faith in God are strong enough for others to look at and say, "Ah. They believe in something worth following. It changes their lives. Look at that love that they have."
- On the other hand, we haven't done very well convincing others that God exists, because, when we do get passionate about God, there are problems there too. Sometimes those that get passionate about God really do go overboard! Fanaticism creeps in easily. We become hard and cruel and, once again, unloving: judgmental of others. So it's hard to carry out this witness effectively. If we give ourselves to God fully, we must do it freely, and love must still be our primary virtue.

The atheists are right when they look at our lives and our witness. There are times when it just doesn't add up to much. It's not always a pretty picture.

Personal Lives and the Impact of Beliefs: The Failings of the Atheists! *On the other hand*, what is often left out of this argument is that it is not always a pretty picture when you look at the other side of the coin either. If you look at the world without God, it's a pretty ugly picture as well. The picture is just as bad or worse. What often gets left out of the news when religion is blamed for everything (and Christopher Hitchens, in "How Religion Poisons Everything," at least acknowledges this problem, and discusses it quite well) – what often gets left out of the picture is the fact that so many of the slaughters, especially of the twentieth century, were caused by what we might call godless ideologies: Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, PolPot, racism, tribalism, all have been at work, causing far more trouble and pain in this world than any religions have caused, especially in the twentieth century.

So you can look one way or the other. Many people only look one way and blame religion, but if you look at the other option, it's not a pretty picture either. Blaming the problems of the world on God or religion is, I believe, historically inaccurate and really quite unfair.

The atheists though still have a point that our witness needs to be ramped up if people are to take God seriously.

The Problem of Evil. But we can go beyond that, beyond our personal lives as Christians, and deal with another question, the big question as to why there are evil and trouble in the world at all. And this too is an enormous question that not only atheists, but all of us have to face. *If there is a God, why is there so much injustice in the world? Why is there so much tragedy? Why is there so much evil in the world? Why are there so many natural disasters?*

Look back over the last decade. Hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, that huge tsunami, why are all these things there? How can we believe in God when all these things happen? Of course, this is really not a problem for the 'idea of god' as such. If God is not good, then you can explain evil. That is, if God is grumpy, and if God really is powerless, then you might expect that all these bad things would happen in this world. So, this is, in fact, a problem for us Christians in particular and for our God in particular: it is *because we believe that God is good, because we believe that God is just and because we believe that God is the Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, that we have a problem with evil in the world.* Our God, the kind of god we believe in, *can do something about it and doesn't seem*

to be doing something about it – and that’s the problem. However, it’s not the problem I’m going to address this morning! It’s a huge problem that all kinds of people have tried to address over the years.

I have some thoughts about it (that I’ve shared on other occasions and will certainly share in the days ahead). Though, let me say this: in the very act of choosing to create something that is not God, and that has real, accountable choice (in choosing not to make us puppets), God was making a decision that deliberately opened the door to the possibility, and perhaps even the certainty of evil.

The Problem of Good. This morning, however, all I want to do is to turn that question around and say, “Yes, we as Christians have a problem with the ‘problem of evil’! But, we’re not alone. You see, *the atheists have a problem as well*. They have a question to answer which I think is just as difficult to answer!

□ So here’s the Christian problem question. If God is so good and God is so powerful, why is there evil?

□ The other question is this. ***If there is no God***, if everything is a matter of natural selection, if everything is a matter of chance and the survival of the fittest, ***why is there so much good in the world?*** Why so much beauty? Why so many amazing things in this world? That’s a question that needs to be asked as well.” How come there is something as beautiful as sacrificial love which doesn’t have to do with the survival of the fittest? And we all know that it is good and right and beautiful.

Sir Edward Elgar was once asked if a particular opera singer was great. He thought about the question for a moment and he said, “No, she’s really good but she’s not great but she could become great if something happens to break her heart.” She could become great if something happens to break her heart.

He knew that sometimes when life disintegrates and later pulls itself together again, something wonderful emerges, like a rose coming out of a dung pile. Stevie Nicks, to bring us a little more up to date, of Fleetwood Mac, once said ‘Devastation leads to writing really good things,’ – and then, how come Taylor Swift makes so much money by having relationships that are always breakin up, and that she will never go back to?

How is that possible? Why does that happen if there is no God, or if all is arbitrary? It’s a really good question that the atheist has to ask. All I want to suggest this morning is this that while there are good questions to challenge the existence of God, there are really good questions on the other side as well. No matter which way you turn whether as believers or unbelievers, there are questions that we need to ask.

Clues FOR God. I happen to agree with Timothy Keller, a Presbyterian pastor in Manhattan who has written a book called *The Reason for God* (following up on a book by sociologist, Peter Berger: “A Rumor of Angels”) that ***you can argue about the existence of God until you are blue in the face, one way or the other, but you really cannot prove things by reason***. In the end, no matter who we are, no matter what side we come down on, ***we each believe***. The atheist believes as much as the believer believes. We all make a ‘choice’ at one point or another and in a sense, this choice is always a step beyond reason

Peter Hitchens, a journalist, author of “The Rage Against God,” and Christopher Hitchens’ brother, is a Christian who believes that if modern intellectuals are to return to faith, then they will probably do so through art, and some sudden change of vision, than through argument.

Dr. Keller in his book instead of speaking about proofs for God, speaks about ***clues for God***, and I’d like to leave you this morning with two of the clues which touched my life in a particular way.

The first clue has to do with science and stems from some words spoken by Dr. Francis Collins who now heads up the National Institute of Health in Bethesda. Dr Collins was the lead scientist in the human genome project and is a deeply committed Christian.

By the way, he also argues that the whole debate on evolution which has dogged the church for the past one hundred and fifty years since the time of Charles Darwin is a complete and utter waste of time. It is a red herring. It doesn’t have anything to do with the existence of God or otherwise. I would agree with him. The Bible doesn’t tell us *how* the world was created or *how long* it took. The Bible tells us *that* the world was created by God and God was in the whole process. Even the Bible itself understands that when Genesis speaks about a day, it’s not speaking about twenty-four hours. This is a metaphor. Look at 2 Peter. “With the Lord a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as a day.” Even back in the time of the Bible, they knew that to take that too literally was to misread what God intended.

Francis Collins says that ***the miracle is not that it happened in one way or another but that creation happened at all***: that you and I are here at all. The biggest question of all is “why is there something rather than nothing,” and

how come in this creation we have ended up here? He says that this is so statistically unlikely as to be absolutely absurd. He writes (www.salon.com/books/int/2006/08/07/collins/index.html)

We have this very solid conclusion that the universe had an origin, the big bang. Fifteen billion years ago, the universe began with an unimaginably bright flash of energy from an infinitesimally small point. That implies that before that, there was nothing. I can't imagine how nature, in this case the universe, could have created itself and the very fact that the universe had a beginning implies that someone was able to begin it and it seems to be that that had to be outside of nature.

In other words, it is beyond scientific investigation. The scientists can only go so far. The rest is a matter of what you believe. He goes on to write:

When you look from the perspective of a scientist at the universe, it looks as if the universe knew that we were coming as human beings. In other words, somehow there is a mind in this universe. There are fifteen constants. The gravitation constant, various constants about the strong and the weak nuclear forces and so on that have very precise values. If any one of those constants was off by even one part in a million or in some cases by one part in a million million, the universe could not have actually come to the point where we see it. Matter would not have been able to coalesce (to come together). There would have been no galaxy, no stars, no planets, no people, no you or me.

One part in a million or million million! So unlikely unless there is a mind behind it all. It's not a proof for God. But it is a pretty good clue. But it points to the idea of God as a good idea.

And so are these final words, **the second clue**, remarkable words, about a world without God from two of the twentieth century's great secular writers and thinkers.

- Here are some words by Somerset Maugham (quoted in T. Keller, p.127) . He says:
If one puts aside the existence of God and the survival after life is too doubtful, one has to make up one's mind as to the use of life. If death ends all, if I have neither to hope for good nor to fear evil, I must ask myself what I am here for and how in these circumstances I must conduct my life. Now the answer is plain but so unpalatable that most will not face it. The answer is this. There is no meaning for life and thus life has no meaning.
This is somebody who doesn't believe in God saying, "this is the sad but logical conclusion of what I believe."
- Here is John Paul Sartre (Keller, p.127):
It was true. I had always realized it. I hadn't any right to exist at all. I had appeared by chance. I existed like a stone, a plant, a microbe. I was thinking that here we are eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence and that there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing if there is no God.

Created for an Eternal Relationship. Every one of us asks the question why? Why are we here? We have a hunger for meaning. We have a hunger for purpose and it's deep within our souls. Most frequently, I believe that this hunger is met on a human level *in our relationships with one another*. We live and we find meaning in the blessing that others give to us, in the opinions that others share with us, in the love that they have for us, and in the love that we have for them. And when those relationships die or break, something in us dies and breaks. I happen to think that this is the greatest clue of all (which first touched my life 40 years ago, reading Francis Schaffer's "Death in the City") – ***and it points to the fact that we were made on purpose not just for one another, but for an eternal relationship with one who will never die, whose relationship with us will never break; with one whose passion for you and me is amazing and is undeserved, unearned, filled with grace, who comes to us from beyond and enters our world, though he does not have to, and touches our lives for good, for ever, . . .*** and, as we find in this bread and wine at the communion table, he's willing even to be broken for you and me.

This is an eternal relationship which gives meaning to everything in this universe which seems to have no meaning, and which will grip us in this life and beyond.

I believe. I believe in God. I believe in God the Father Almighty. I trust you do too. I trust, as well, that the mind that God has given you, will be one that you will always use to think through your faith in this God.