

Series: "Questions About God and Life"
"Is there a God? If so, can God be known?"

I am beginning a series of messages on some of the questions people ask about God, and life. Some of these are questions that for some may be a stumbling block to a life of faith. Today, to get started, we'll begin with one of the most fundamental questions of life: *Is there a God?*

Have you ever wondered, "Is there really a God?" Maybe you even go to church, or claim to be a Christian, but you have moments of reflection where you wonder if all this stuff about God isn't just wishful thinking. Is there really a God?

How many people don't believe in God? Atheists would say there is no God. Agnostics are those who maintain that we just don't know, we can't be sure there is a God.

Actually, assessing whether someone is an atheist isn't as easy as we may think! For instance, some people say they are atheists, but then say they believe in a higher power! On the other hand, some identify with a religion (Catholic, Jewish), but say they don't believe in a God! Go figure that one out!

To simplify the discussion a bit, let me just summarize some things current research suggests. First, generally speaking, roughly 10% of people in the United States say they don't believe in any God or higher power. However, some observers believe that the *actual* numbers of people who don't believe in God are higher than the 10% or so the Pew organization claims from their research. For instance, an older Harris *online poll* indicated that only 73% of Americans said they believe in God, and only 58% are "absolutely certain" that God exists. One reason for the discrepancy in numbers might be that pollsters suspect that people tend to be more honest in an *online* survey than if they're talking to an interviewer on the phone.

Another trend that is taking place is that just as more and more Americans are claiming no religious affiliation, the percent of people in the U.S. who say they don't believe in a God or higher power is rising. It is not skyrocketing in numbers, but it is creeping upwards. A telephone survey by the Pew Research Center in 2018 showed 4% of American adults said they are atheists (up from 2% in 2009). An additional 5% called themselves agnostics – those who doubt there is a God (up from 3% in 2009).

When we look beyond the United States we see that atheism in *European countries* is significantly higher! 2017 Pew Research in 15 European countries indicated that the percent of people *who say they don't believe in God* is: 60% in Sweden, 54% in Belgium, and 53% in the Netherlands. Almost two-thirds of people in the Czech Republic claim they don't believe in God!

Several sidenotes to the findings. In the U.S. polls suggest that a higher percent of *women* believe in God than men. The most likely atheist is a *young white male with a college degree*. Also, *Republicans* are more likely to believe in God than *Democrats*!

What keeps some people from believing in God? I recently read an extraordinary book by

Francis S. Collins. It's called, *The Language of God*. It's subtitle is: "A Scientist Presents Evidence For Belief in God." Collins is one of the world's leading scientists. He is head of the Human Genome Project. In the book he tells of his journey from atheism to Christian faith. I will refer more to his book in week 3 of this series, when we deal with the topic, "Do the Bible and Modern Science Contradict Each Other?"

Dr. Collins suggests some major reasons why people shun a belief in God. First, some skeptics maintain that the idea of a God is just wish fulfillment. It's "a universal but groundless longing for something outside ourselves to give meaning to a meaningless life and to take away the sting of death." Then others point to all the harm done in the name of religion? Terrible things have been done in the name of God, church, and religion. We'll think about this issue in the next to last message in this series. Still, others who do not believe in God question why a loving God would allow suffering in the world. If God is loving and all powerful, they insist, why wouldn't He stop some of the horrible things that happen (like COVID-19, children dying of cancer or starvation, etc.)? We will tackle that thorny question in next week's message.

These, and other factors, can make some people either doubt, or dismiss, the belief that there is a God.

But one of the core beliefs of Christianity is that there is a God. None of the writers of Scripture debate whether or not there is a God. The Bible assumes there is a God. Jesus simply accepted the reality that God exists. But besides what the Bible says, is there any evidence to support a belief in God?

Some use the classic "cause and effect" argument for a belief in God: that every effect must have a cause. Take this church building, or your home. All the bricks and mortar, wood, drywall, shingles, didn't come together by chance. Someone must have made it. Look at the world in which we live, it's breathtaking beauty. Think of the incredible design and order of the universe. Someone or something must have caused it. High powered telescopes can explore the incomprehensible vastness of galaxies. I've looked through microscopes to the world invisible to the naked eye, and seen amoeba and paramecia squirming around! Did all of this come about by chance?

One atheist, arguing that the universe came about by chance, says that if you sat 6 monkeys down at the keyboard of a computer and let them "strum unintelligently...for millions and millions of years" they would be bound in time to write all the books in the British museum. And I say, "Really!" A scientist named A. Cressy Morrison demonstrates how improbable it is that the universe came about by chance. He says if you placed 10 coins in your pocket, numbered 1 through 10, the chance of drawing them out in succession (1,2,3,4 etc.) would be 1 in 10 billion! This scientist concludes: "So many essential conditions are necessary for life to exist on our earth that it is impossible that all of them could exist in proper relationship by chance. Therefore, there must be in nature some form of intelligent direction."

Actually, advances in astronomy and astrophysics over the last 50 years have called into question

the belief that the universe always was, or that it happened by chance. The cosmos did *not* always exist. It had a beginning. Therefore, many argue, there must have had to be a "beginner", a first cause.

None of this *proves* that there is a God, but truthfully, I find it harder to believe that this magnificent creation happened by chance than for me to believe that some supernatural power created it all!

The Bible points to how the world and nature reveal a Creator God. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." Romans 1:20 tells us, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...". Notice, creation hints at certain aspects of the God behind creation. This God is eternal – "his *eternal* power" - God always was and always will be. God is incredibly powerful – "his *eternal power*". God is Other, not like us – "and divine nature". God is non-material, non-physical – "God's invisible qualities". So, there is a "general revelation" in creation that points to the existence of a Supreme Being.

But there's more that points to the existence of God. *There is the moral argument.* There seems to be an innate moral compass in every civilization, in every tribe of human beings, that senses right and wrong. Though it may vary from culture to culture, there is this pervading sense of "ought" that implies a moral standard beyond the human situation, and sanctions imposed by a transcending power (God).

Some point also to the universal yearning among human beings for the religious and spiritual. Religion is a universal human phenomenon. In every country, in every century, human beings have shown an innate longing to *worship* something beyond themselves. Human beings are incurably religious! The theologian Karl Barth called this an "incurable Godsickness".

These are just some of the points arguing for a belief in God. I highly recommend this book, *The Language of God*, as Dr. Collins lists arguments against belief in God, and then counters with his own rebuttal of these, as a scientist, and as a man of faith.

Is there a God? Do you believe in God? These are core questions of our human existence. But there is another question equally important: ***If there is a God, what kind of God do you believe in?*** *USA Today* once polled a number of Americans about their belief in God. Not surprisingly they discovered that Americans have very different images of God. The kind of God we believe in will shape how we live our lives. *What is God like? Is God hostile or friendly? Is God involved in the world? Can God be known? These are all immensely important questions.*

There are many people who believe in God as a cosmic force, some impersonal higher power, but not a God involved in the world or in peoples' lives.

Christians believe in a God who is involved in life, in history, a God who can be known and

experienced. Our belief in God, if we're Christians, is not based on mere speculation, but on historical fact! God has revealed Himself in human history. Some 4,000 years ago God revealed Himself in a special way through a nation called Israel. 2,000 years ago, God made Himself known most supremely through Jesus of Nazareth. God is so invested in this world that at one point He entered the world in the Person of Jesus!

The Bible is the written record of how God has made Himself known to us humans. And because of this, we don't have to guess at what God is like! John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." The words of Hebrews 1:1-3 are very pertinent to this discussion: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." Notice, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation his being." Jesus loved and cared about people. God loves and cares about people. Jesus opposed evil and all that destroys the goodness of life. God opposes evil and all that destroys the goodness of life.

Jesus revealed a God who is "personal" – not just some distant cosmic force. God is "personal" in that God has self-awareness, like us. God has a mind: God reasons, thinks and wills. God has feelings: God laughs, grieves, hopes, forgives. And because God is "personal" God wants to be in relationship with His creation.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul said to the people of Athens, as he's arguing against their unbelief: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us" (Acts 17:24-27). God wants us to reach out and seek a relationship with Him.

Through God's Son Jesus we can have an intimate relationship with our Creator. Galatians 4:4-6 tells us: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'" The word "Abba" is an Aramaic word that's hard to translate into English. It's an intimate term, like a child saying "My father", or "Daddy"! You and I can have that kind of close, intimate relationship with God when we give our lives over to Christ and follow Him!

Some of you, who may not be convinced of God's existence, or of the Christian God, are probably saying, "Harry, you haven't convinced me. You've read passages from the Bible, but I don't necessarily believe the Bible." I hear you! And that is a whole other discussion! But let

me just remind you that *the Bible did not shape our belief in the existence of God or what God is like*. Rather, *people's experience of God (especially in the Person of Jesus)* led to what was written in the Bible! The Bible has authority in teaching us about God because the Bible ultimately points us to Jesus, who is the exact representation of the nature and character of God!

Psalm 14:1 says, "Fools say in their heart, 'There is no God.'" I heard a story of an atheist who filed a lawsuit. He said religions have their special holidays – Christmas, Easter, Hannakuh etc., so atheists ought to have a special day. The judge hearing the case threw it out by saying, "You already have your day. April Fool's Day"!

In light of all the evidence pointing to the existence of God, aren't we fools not to believe it? Yet, when all is said and done, we can't *prove* there is a God. We must accept this on faith.

Hebrews 11:6 reminds us of that, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

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