

# If God exists then what do I say to an atheist?

Preached Sunday, February 3, 2008

Rev. David Tinney

Text: Psalm 8

Theme: In the end I cannot prove that God exists. No one can. But science cannot prove that God does not exist.

As Sam Harris, one of the new breed of atheists, brings his book *"A Letter to a Christian Nation"* to a close he writes:

There is, in fact, no worldview more reprehensible in its arrogance than that of a religious believer: [who says] the creator of the universe takes an interest in me, approves me, loves me, and will reward me after my death; my current beliefs, drawn from scripture, will remain the best statement of that truth until the end of the world; everyone who disagrees with me will spend eternity in hell... An average Christian, in an average church, listening to an average Sunday sermon has achieved a level of arrogance simply unimaginable in scientific discourse – and there are some extraordinarily arrogant scientists."<sup>1</sup>

As I have said several times in this series there are parts of the critiques from atheists that I agree with and then there are parts that I find reprehensible and arrogant. This statement is no different. But it provides the perfect platform for what I hope will be an above average sermon where I can humbly make a case for my belief in God. Will you join me in prayer.

Prayer

This is the final sermon in the series "If God Exists..." and I will have to confess it has been a series that has pushed me and my understanding of God, prayer, the Church, and the positive and negative power of religion in the world. I have never studied so hard for a series or preached so long in the pulpit. We experienced what I call "sermon creep" which means that each week the preaching got longer and longer. Last week after approaching the 30 minute mark I thought the creep had reached its max but a couple of you met me on the way out and told me I could have kept preaching for another hour. So I believe this series truly hit its mark and means we need to keep going in these areas of critically examining our faith.

As I said in the beginning of the series there is now a very vocal, nearly evangelical and even fundamental atheist group emerging in our culture. They take delight in exposing the lunatic fringe in all religions for their weak and destructive practices, doctrines, and theologies, but let's face it so do we. The problem I have with their critique is they become as fundamental and black and white as the people they are lambasting. It seems that their anger, bitterness, and arrogance spill over into what could be a great debate or discussion that would help all of our faith journeys.

Over the past five weeks I have dealt with their charges that science disproves religion and our need for God, that religion and God are the root cause of evil and violence, that the Bible is a violent book and filled with strange texts revealing an even stranger God, and that we are delusional because we worship a God who allows – no make that causes – suffering and violence to occur. These challenges to our faith have at least for me strengthened my faith as I have had to examine my beliefs. Today I would like to make my best case for why I believe in God and hopefully your faith will grow in the process.

In order to make my case for God I would like to go at it from three angles: 1) Holy longing; 2) Holy wiring; and 3) Holy experiences. Please pull out your handouts and you will see these categories with plenty of room for notes. Let us begin with “Holy Longing.”

Richard Dawkins and others contend that science has replaced religion. As science continues to discover more and more of the mysteries of life there is less and less need or room for God. They would say that there was no supernatural creating force and that this universe, the terrestrial ball that sustains life, and that humankind are all acts of randomness. I disagree and I believe that science strengthens my claim in a Creator God rather than diminishing it.

When I preached the sermon on science I turned to Francis Collins, the distinguished geneticist who headed up the Human Genome Project, for his insights. Collins confesses in his book, *“The Language of God”* that he was an atheist until he had to deal with a deep yearning or longing within him that science could not answer. It was like an itch that all the scratching in the world could not relieve. He had learned from very educated atheists that this longing was nothing more than “wishful thinking” that there was something bigger than ourselves and that God had been invented by humankind to fulfill that wish. But the more he studied and explored the stronger the longing became.

He wrote, “Could it be that this longing for the sacred, a universal and puzzling aspect of the human experience, may not be wish fulfillment but rather a pointer toward something beyond us? Why do we have a ‘God-shaped vacuum’ in our hearts and minds unless it is meant to be filled?”<sup>2</sup> And fill it he did.

Collins’ fastidious research was not limited to genetics but he applied his skills to cosmology as well and determined that science clearly supports the idea of a Creator God through the explanation of the Big Bang Theory. He explained that in order for the universe to be created from this explosion of energy and matter there would have to be a series of coincidences involving matter and antimatter, quarks and anti-quarks; and expansion rates that could not vary by as much as a 100 thousand million millionth of a second.<sup>3</sup> He wrote, “The existence of the universe as we know it rest upon a knife edge of improbability.”<sup>4</sup> But that is just the creation of the universe. When you think of the possibility of the creation of a planet with just the right temperatures, just the right chemicals and gases, and just the right combinations to allow life the knife edge becomes infinitely sharp.

Collins, who does understand the power of evolution and natural selection counters Dawkins and others and says that the likelihood of the earth and humankind being created randomly would be similar to a hurricane sweeping through a junkyard and assembling a fully functioning Boeing 747.

I concur with Stephen Hawking , a world renown physicist and mathematician, who wrote, “It would be difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as an act of God who intended to create beings like us.”<sup>5</sup> The psalmist 2500 years ago said it in another way, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

For centuries humankind has been mindful of something greater than ourselves – something that created us and the world around us. To quote another psalmist the mysterious “deep calls to the deep within us” and will not stop calling until we respond and come close. I know this deep longing personally. I have talked with many of you and I know you are aware of this holy restlessness. When we try to fill it with other things it persists until we fill it with God. How do I know there is a God? The deep keeps calling within me. My holy longing – your holy longing will not go away until we find our home in God.

The second proof I would use as I make my case for God is that of “holy wiring.” In his book *“Mere Christianity”* C. S. Lewis begins his proof of God’s existence by first establishing the fact that all of us

seem to be prewired for “Moral Law.” Moral Law can also be called “The Law of Right and Wrong,” or “The Law of Decent Behavior,” or some might even call it today absolute truth, or some might even call it our conscience. Whatever we call it, it is the standard of behavior that seems to transcend cultural, economic, ethnic, political, temporal, gender, religious, and age classification. Throughout history humankind has been wired with a sense of proper conduct. Obviously there are differences in how these rules are lived out or interpreted but they tremendously similar.

For instance most societies throughout history look unfavorably on people who lie, or cheat, or who are selfish. In most societies kindness, courage, honesty, generosity, and selflessness are admired. Humankind did not invent this law so where did it come from. Lewis would say it is God’s law written upon our hearts.

Leading atheists would say that it is part of our instinct and training but that goes against the scientific definition of instinct and natural selection. Instincts are those deep impulses or drives that help us survive and reproduce. Moral Law often runs counter to our instincts. Our instincts would say that we should always be strong and never show our weakness – but our consciences say that we should care for those who are weak and poor. Our instincts would say that we should repopulate as much as possible to ensure our survival but our moral law kicks in and says that I need to be faithful to my one and only one spouse. Our conscience calls us to sacrificial acts of agape love which it runs counter to instincts.

Perhaps the greatest proof of the existence of God is this inner voice – sometimes called a conscience – that whispers to us to practice selfless love in a world where sacrifice is dangerous.

Finally let me move to the category of “holy experiences.” Do you remember the opening statement by Sam Harris? He rants that there is no one more reprehensible and arrogant than a religious believer who feels their God loves them, takes interest in them, approves of them, and even rewards them after death. Well I must be the most arrogant and reprehensible of the lot because that is exactly what I believe. I believe with all my heart that God cares about me, and you, and you, and you, and you, and everyone in this room and in this room with the same intensity whether you are a sinner or saint or whether you are a believer or an atheist.

I do not believe that a natural consequence of God’s love for me and interest in me is that those who disagree with me and my beliefs will spend eternity in hell or that believers need to be arrogant. In fact it is humbling to know that as much a sinner that I am that God still cares and still loves me and forgives me.

Can I prove there is a supernatural being who loves me and you? No. But neither can the atheists prove there isn’t one. Then how do I know there is a God of love, forgiveness, and grace? I feel it when I am doing God’s work. I know it in my very soul (and I believe I have a soul and this is not the end of life) when I connect with someone who is in need of healing or forgiveness and offer love and redemption. I know it in the peace that passes over me when I participate in an act of worship or in an act of mission or in an act of selfless giving. I know it when I read the scriptures of the past and I feel the words of the psalmist touch my heart and describe a feeling that has been waiting to explode within me. I know it when in the midst of suffering and struggle I turn to God and suddenly I am enveloped in unexplainable joy.

Last week we talked about prayer and whether we were fooling ourselves in raising messages to a non-existent deity. Atheists would say that it is wasted time and nothing happens in prayer. I know differently. I have prayed hundreds of times and in the middle of my prayer an urging will come. I don’t know how to describe it except that it comes unexpectedly and with extreme clarity. Sometimes I am

urged to call someone I haven't talked to for a long time, sometimes I feel the urge to say something to someone and I don't know why I am saying it, and sometimes it is to go somewhere and wait.

When I obey these urgings and I most often do, the results are amazing. One time I stopped a suicide that was just starting, dozens of times I have confronted people with addictions they thought were hidden, many times I have responded to crises while they were happening and was there for people in their greatest hour of need. People will often say when I show up or when I call, "Well this is a coincidence..." but I know it is a God incidence. I believe so strongly in the Holy Spirit working through prayer that I will do nothing major in my life without consulting God in prayer.

A few moments ago I mentioned my soul and I would like to come back to that concept of soul. Atheists believe only in what we see and touch. For them there is no life after death and no eternity with God. That is indeed tragic. I believe with all my being there is a life after death and I believe as well that eternity and life with God starts on this side of death. I was convinced of this while working as a chaplain in a hospital in Columbus, Ohio while I was going through seminary. On one particular shift I think I witnessed six of seven deaths and one stood out above all the rest. I remember entering the room and the entire family had gathered around the bed of a man who was near the end of his life.

We joined hands in a circle and lifted prayers and in the middle of our prayer he passed on but when he did it felt like the whole room suddenly filled with energy and light. I swear it felt like there were hands lifting him from our hands and welcoming him gently into the kingdom. Every person around the circle felt it. It was the intrusion of heaven into our earthly realm and it was as real to me as you are sitting in front of me right now. There was a peace that filled that space like none other I had ever felt before. No atheist will ever explain that away. No one will ever take that away. On that day death lost its sting and power.

Many of you know my call to ministry so I will not recall the details. The fact that God called me at the age of eleven and never gave up even when I turned my back on him for three decades is one of the greatest acts of grace and redemption I know of. The fact that whenever I went as far from my Nineveh (I was just teaching about Jonah and the whale this week) and God kept finding ways to bring me back and put people in my life to speak my call. The fact that I had a burning bush experience in a modern culture where those types of things simply don't happen – puts an exclamation point on the statement GOD EXISTS!

Most of us sitting in this room this morning are here because we believe that God exists. We can't prove it. We can't convince someone else through words or logic. But we can show it in the way we live our lives. I believe most atheists do not believe in God because they refuse to believe in a power and authority greater than themselves and refuse to bow down to something that might transform them. For those of us in this room right now who have bowed down we know there have been moments where we have experienced peace that passes all understanding. We know that in the midst of our deepest struggles and suffering God has walked with us holding us up. We know that when it was impossible to forgive and move on in relationships God gave us the love and the strength to do it. We know in our souls God exists.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sam Harris, "A Letter to a Christian Nation," Knopf Publication, NY, NY. 2007 p74-5.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Collins, "The Language of God," p38

<sup>3</sup> Collins, p72-3

<sup>4</sup> Collins, p73

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Hawking, "A Brief History of Time," p144