

ROMANS 1.20: CAN I REALLY BELIEVE IN GOD?

Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford 16 September 2007

As part of a major religious survey seven years ago 1000 randomly selected people were telephoned across Great Britain.

A majority believed in God (62%), Jesus (62%), heaven (52%) and life after death (51%), but more believed in a soul (69%) and sin (71%). Fewer believed in hell (28%) and re-incarnation (25%).

A third (31%) regarded themselves as 'spiritual', and 27% as 'religious', but 21% said they were 'not a religious person'; 10% agnostic and 8% a convinced atheist.

More than two-thirds (71%) often or sometimes thought about the meaning and purpose of life. Over half (55%) of respondents said there was 'a patterning of events in your life that convinces you that in some strange way they were meant to happen', of whom a third (32%) described this experience as religious. Three in every 7 (38%) had had 'an awareness of God', and an almost equal number (37%) 'that you are receiving help in answer to prayer'

Belief in God doesn't make a person a Christian.

Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs believe in God.

Nonetheless, belief in God is a basic building block to Christian believing.

For this reason I want to answer the question: "Can I really believe in God?"

IT IS FOOLISH NOT TO BELIEVE IN GOD

Centuries ago, the Psalmist wrote: "**Fools say to themselves, 'There is no God'**" (Ps 13.1; 53.1). Wow! According to the Psalmist people who don't believe in God, far from being thinking people, are described as fools

That's strong language. Most of us would feel affronted to be called a fool.

We don't mind perhaps being told that we are mistaken - we may not mind people disagreeing with us - but to be told that we are fools is quite another matter.

What is a fool?

A fool is someone who denies a self-evident truth - who takes a position based on arguments that will not stand up against the bar of reason and experience.

- For example, suppose someone told us that only the planet earth can support human life, and that however far we may cruise through outer space in the next decades, we shall not find anywhere in the universe another planet inhabited by living creatures. We might disagree with them; we might say that they have insufficient evidence for so sweeping a claim; but we shall certainly not call them fools, because we know that their claim cannot yet be proved or disproved.
- If, on the other hand, if someone were to tell us quite dogmatically that the islands in the Caribbean cannot support human life, we would probably call that person something worse than a fool - for we have all met people from the Caribbean; some of us have even spent holidays there. No life in the Caribbean? What utter foolishness!

It is in this last category that the Psalmist rates those who deny the reality of God. There is almost no point in arguing with such people, because their arguments will not stand against the bar of reason and experience. They refuse to concede what is in fact self-evident. For the existence of God is not some mystery reserved for the eyes of the few.

In the words of our text, **“Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things God has made”** (Rom 1.20)

Or as the Message paraphrase puts it: *“The basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can’t see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being”*.

Paul is here no one-eyed theologian. He is just observing the fact is that ***people have always believed in God.***

There never has been a tribe or group of people who have not believed in him. We human beings are incurably religious.

Somehow we cannot live without believing in God.

- The Russians sought to abolish religion after the Revolution in 1917. They failed. They tried against with violent persecution under Stalin. They failed. Russia remains a religious country.
- It is the same in China. The Chinese have done their best to suppress religion – in particular they sought to do away with the Christian religion. But they failed. The Chinese church today is much stronger than ever it was.

The fact is that human beings are incredibly religious. In the words of the Psalmist: **“As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God”** (Ps 42.1-2 NRSV)

This very need for people to believe in God is a pointer to the existence of God. In the words of CS Lewis: *“A man’s physical hunger does not prove that a man will get any bread; he may die of starvation in a fast in the Atlantic. But surely a man’s hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it is a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called ‘falling in love’ occurred in a sexless world”* (Screwtape Proposes a Toast, 9) . Our hunger for God is a clear indication of the existence of God

True, there may be no final proof for the existence of God - but then, from a philosophical point of view, you can’t prove that your mother loves you or that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Indeed, you cannot prove that you are the same person you were ten years ago. But if there is no final proof, the evidence for the existence of God is so strong and so powerful that only a foolish person would discount such evidence.

The traditional so-called proofs for the existence of God are five in number. Today I want to briefly comment on them.

1. The fact of the world's existence (the cosmological argument)

Without God, then how do you explain the fact that there is a world like ours?
In a world where cause and effect are the rule, it isn't rational to argue that this world has no cause. There is a reason for things being as they are.
Just as the existence of a murdered person implies that there must be a murderer, so the existence of our world implies surely a creator?
If you don't believe in God, then how do you explain the very fact of the world?

It's not enough to attribute the beginning of the world to the 'Big Bang'. For the question then arises: from where did the Big Bang spring from? The world could not have created itself: there must be a First Cause. That First Cause must be God!

Professor Stephen Hawking, the motor-neurone academic who is wheelchair-bound and is the author of 'A Brief History of Time', has developed a theory of creation which does away with the need of a First Cause. I confess that as a non-scientist I cannot follow his argument. However, what I do find interesting is that Hawking recognises that his theory does not do away with God. *"Although science may solve the problem of how the Universe began, it cannot answer the question: why does the Universe bother to exist? I don't know the answer that"*. For the Christian, of course, the answer is found in God. In the words of Gen 1: **"In the beginning"** was God!

2. The fact of design (the teleological argument)

At every level the world of nature shows evidence of design.
Think of the focusing equipment of an eye, of the radar of a bat, of the camouflage of a nesting pheasant. Reflect on the marvel - miracle - of conception & birth.
At every point there is evidence of a great designer.

The classic argument for God from design was developed by William Paley, an 18th century Cambridge scholar: *"Suppose a man is walking across a moor and he happens to hit his foot against a watch. He picks it up; he has never seen a watch before; he examines it. He sees that the hands are moving round the dial in what is clearly an orderly way. He opens it up and finds inside a host of wheels and cogs and levers and springs and jewels. He discovers that by winding up the watch, you can set it going, and that the whole complicated machinery is moving in what is obviously a pre-determined pattern. What then does he say? Does he say: 'By chance all these wheels and levers and jewels and springs came together and formed themselves into this thing I have in my hand. By chance they have set themselves going. By chance they move in an orderly way. By chance this watch became an instrument which counts the hours and minutes and seconds'"* No. If he applies his mind to this problem at all he says: *'I have found a watch. Somewhere there must be a watchmaker'*. So then when we discover a world where there is an order more accurate than any watch, where tides ebb and flow according to schedule, where spring, summer, autumn and winter come back in unvarying succession, where the planets never leave their courses, where the same cause always produces the same effect, we are bound to say: *'I have found a world. Somewhere there must be a world-maker'"*

John Polkinghorne, who left the Chair of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge University, to become ordained and then later returned to Cambridge as President of Queen's College, has written: *"Wherever you look in the world you see the evidence of design: in the laws of physics, in the development of an embryo, in the delicate balance of an ear, in the radar of a bar, in the uniqueness of each snowflake. You have to be very hard-boiled and very determined in your rejection of God to argue that all this evidence of design in the world is illusory or simply exhibits adaptation in the unsupervised evolutionary march"*.

In the words of the Psalmist: **"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork"** (Ps 19.1 NRSV). Or in the words of the Apostle Paul **"Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things God has made"** (Rom 1.20)

Incidentally, this argument from design is not negated by the theory of evolution – indeed, if anything the theory of evolution enhances our belief in God. So RJ Berry, a distinguished Professor of Genetics in the University of London, wrote: *"To most people in the West, Christianity is not so much wrong as unnecessary. There is no need to believe in a First Cause who is impotent in the world He created. But Darwin has forced us to recognize that any religion worth consideration is one where the God is in constant control of everyday events"*. The God behind the process of evolution is the God who is working out his design.

3. The fact of conscience (the moral argument)

How we know what is right and wrong?

How is it that we can distinguish between a saint and a sinner, between a Mother Theresa and an Adolf Hitler?

Despite the diversity of human cultures, there is remarkable agreement on the essential values to which conscience points. There is for instance a general condemnation of murder and theft, of adultery and lust. There is universal agreement that peace is right and war is wrong, that love is right and hate is wrong. How come?

John Oman, an old Scottish philosopher, once said: *"Whoever says 'ought', really meaning 'ought', is in that act bearing witness to the supernatural and supra-temporal as the destined home of man"*. I.e. the moment we sense an obligation, a principle, a duty, that moment we arrive at God.

Emmanuel Kant, the great German philosopher, once said: *"Two things convince me of God: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me"*

If there is no God, then how do we explain our innate sense of morality?

4. The fact of history (providence).

As far as Christians are concerned Henry Ford was wrong when he said history is “bunk” (pace Henry Ford). Nor is it simply “one damn thing after another”.

We believe that there is a movement and a purpose in history, which points to a power behind it all, which points to God.

How otherwise do you explain the survival of Israel after centuries of slavery, exile, oppression, dispersion, and ultimately the holocaust?

How otherwise do you explain the survival of the Christian church during the first three centuries of the Christian era? By every human calculation Jesus should have become just another innocuous god in the Roman pantheon

True modern historians are divided in their judgment on providence.

However, the distinguished Cambridge historian, Professor Herbert Butterfield in his book ‘Christianity and History’, explained the difference of opinion in this way: “*A world of blind men might maintain that their universe was explicable to them without the introduction of a foreign concept like the nation of light*”. The fact is that once our eyes have been opened to the existence of God, then we see the hand of God in history – but first we must look

5. The fact of religious experience.

I.e. the claim many people make that they have experienced God.

True, this is a very subjective claim - and yet there is an element of objectivity.

In the words of RW Dale: “*If I were the only person who saw the sun rise this morning, then I might doubt my experience and call myself a victim of an illusion. But if I hear that many people in different countries and of varied intellectual powers have seen the same thing; and if I’m told that men & women have laid down their lives rather than deny its reality, then my doubt vanishes and I become more sure of myself*”

On returning from his solo navigation of the world, Chay Blyth advised atheists to go sailing single-handed for a few weeks: “*No one will ever say to me there is no God without my remembering these situations. It strengthened every part of me, deepened ever perception and gave me a new awareness of that power outside man which we call God*”.

One of my contemporaries when I was a student at Cambridge was the son of a famous Oxford mathematician, Charles Coulson by name. Coulson once wrote: “*The denial of God is practically always the result of shutting one eye. It may be that for this reason God gave us two*”. I.e. according to Coulson, not to believe is to engage in a form of intellectual dishonesty. Wow, that is strong! But no stronger than what the Psalmist says: “**Fools say to themselves, ‘There is no God’**”

The fact is that “**Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things God has made**” (Rom 1.20).

Goodness, I realise that this morning's sermon has been no more than a whistle-stop tour of the arguments in favour of believing in God. It may well be that for some the sermon has been highly dissatisfying. There are things you wish to challenge and discuss. If so, let me encourage you to join our next Alpha course!