

## **“Tough Questions: Does God Exist?”**

**Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes**

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**(Ps. 8:1-9)**

Last summer when I was planning out the sermon schedule for this year, I felt like God wanted me to emphasize the importance of discipleship in the Christian life throughout the next school year. One of the major initiatives of the 20/20 strategic plan the Session approved last year was for our church to establish a clear path of discipleship and engagement, and three different teams have been created to work on this important goal.

So in my planning I decided that all the sermon series this year would highlight some aspect of learning what it means to be an apprentice, or disciple, of Jesus Christ. In the fall we did a series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer, and we received great feedback from you about how helpful those sermons were as we unpacked this amazing and wonderful prayer the Lord taught His first disciples.

Now that we’ve turned the page on the calendar to 2017, we’re going to continue with this theme of discipleship through the rest of the school year. And during the winter months of January and February we’re going to work through a series of messages on Tough Questions. These are the hard questions people ask about the Christian faith – Does God Exist? Is the Bible reliable? Is Jesus who He claimed to be, and is He the only way? Why does God allow pain and suffering in the world? And so on.

There are two reasons I think it’s important for us to grapple with these hard questions as a matter of our discipleship. The first reason is because in 1 Peter 3:15 we are instructed in Scripture, *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”* Part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be knowledgeable about the reasons to believe, and you and I should develop a proficiency in helping people understand the truth of the Gospel.

The fancy theological word for this endeavor is the word “apologetics.” But apologetics isn’t about apologizing for our faith or for being a Christian. Rather, the word is taken from the Greek word *apologia* which means “a defense.” So apologetics is that study in theology which presents a defense of the Christian faith. It tries to provide honest answers to honest questions and help people understand there are reasons to believe, and Christianity is a reasonable faith.

But there is a second reason that is equally important why I think it’s essential for us to grapple with hard questions in our church. It’s because I want anyone who is a skeptic or who struggles with doubt to know they are welcome here. At

First Pres we want people to know that our church is a safe place to wrestle with doubts and matters of faith, and we're not afraid to grapple with the tough questions in life. You might consider inviting your friends and co-workers or family members who are struggling with Christianity to come and listen to some of these sermons. It will provide a good space for you to have honest conversation with them about what you believe and why you believe it.

In my own search for truth, finding a safe place to wrestle with my own questions was very important in my coming to faith. In the summer of 1969 I found some followers of Christ who weren't afraid of my questions, and finding a safe place to ask those questions was just what I needed as a skeptic in search of truth. And it led me to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ which changed my whole life. May we be that kind of place and that kind of church for people today.

There's one more thing I want to say by way of introduction, and it has to do with doubt. To believers I want to say this. Tim Keller writes in his book *The Reason for God* that a faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it.<sup>1</sup> People who go through life too busy or too indifferent to stop ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy in their lives or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. Believers should be willing to acknowledge and wrestle with their own doubts. It's not enough just to hold to beliefs because you inherited them from your parents. Only as we seriously wrestle with the great questions in life will we be able to own and defend our faith in a robust way.

And to skeptics I want to say this. I think all doubts are really a set of alternate beliefs. For example, if you doubt Christianity because you think there can't be one true religion, then you must recognize that this statement in itself is an act of faith. No one can prove your point empirically, and it's not a universal truth that everyone accepts. The only way to doubt Christianity fairly is to discern the alternate beliefs underneath each of your doubts and then ask yourself what reasons you have for believing them.

Now let's turn to the first question we'll consider in our series.

## **Does God Exist?**

There are many people today who don't believe God exists. For example, on the website *commonsenseathiesm.com*, I read the following quote by James Carr: "When I was a kid I had an imaginary friend and I used to think that he went everywhere with me, and that I could talk to him and that he could hear me, and that he could grant me wishes and stuff. And then I grew up, and I stopped going to church."

Or take another contemporary example. The legendary theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking has said, "One can't prove that God doesn't exist,

but science makes God unnecessary. The laws of physics can explain the universe without the need for a creator.”

So why is it that Christians believe in the existence of God? What are the compelling arguments which convince the followers of Christ that God really does exist? I can't prove that God exists, but I can present to you many clues that point to His existence and make it very reasonable to believe that, in fact, there is a God and He does exist.

It's like the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. When the three bears returned home, they discovered that someone had been eating their bowls of porridge. They also found that someone had been sitting in their chairs, and someone had been sleeping in their beds. There were clues that were left behind by Goldilocks which indicated the presence of someone in the house. And when they finally discovered the little girl, they weren't surprised. God has left us clues to indicate He exists, and I want to share four of those clues with you this morning.

The first clue is what theologians have historically called *the cosmological clue*. When you look at the world, and especially when you look at the vast expanse of the universe, is it reasonable to conclude that this all just happened by accident? Or was there an intelligent creative force behind all that we see in this material world?

People with a rational mindset have been fascinated by the question, “Why is there something instead of nothing?” Why does the universe and the material order even exist at all? In recent years, this question has come into focus because of all the discussion around the Big Bang theory which says there is evidence that the universe is expanding explosively and outwardly from a single point.

Scientist Francis Collins has written, “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 me that had to be outside of nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Something had to make the Big Bang happen; there had to be a force which caused it. The universe demonstrates a remarkable complexity and system of design to such an extent that it compels people to conclude there must be a creator. In the passage we've read together this morning, the psalmist writes, “*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is humanity that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?*” (Ps. 8:1-4).

Did the universe just happen, or was there a creative force behind it all? It points to the existence of God.

The second clue I call the *cosmic welcome mat*. Theologians refer to this clue as the teleological argument for the existence of God, and it goes like this. In order for life to exist on this planet, the fundamental regularities and the constants of physics (such as the speed of light, the gravitational pull of the sun and the earth, and all the functioning of nuclear forces at the subatomic level) must all work perfectly. And the calibration of this happening by chance without divine creation is so tiny as to be statistically negligible. If any of the constants of physics were off by even a little bit, there would be no galaxy, no planets, and no people. Again, Francis Collins puts it in a helpful way: “When you look from the perspective of a scientist at the universe, it looks as if it knew we were coming.”<sup>3</sup>

The third clue I would mention this morning is what some have called the *clue of beauty*. If there is no God, then everything in this world is a cosmic accident. There is no actual purpose for our lives, and we are simply the product of unintended natural forces. If that’s the case, then what we call “beauty” is nothing more than a neurological response to particular data that is hardwired into our minds and our bodies. The way we respond to a beautiful sunset, or to the amazing music that was sung by the worship team today, is just a biochemical reaction, and it doesn’t have any purpose or meaning or merit. Love must also be seen in this light. It’s simply a biochemical response. Does that make sense to you?

Philip Yancey once said that it was the beauty of the music of J.S. Bach that was one of the things that led him back to Christ. He said that the design of pitch, rhythm, meter, and sound combined with the amazing creativity of the musical writing of Bach led him to conclude there must be a God who made all of this possible and enabled people to create such amazing beauty. It couldn’t have happened just by accident.

A final clue I will mention is what is called *the moral clue*. It goes like this: Every culture in every time in history has a universal sense of right and wrong. For example, in every society that has ever been it is generally agreed that murder is a bad thing, and that telling the truth is a good thing. And there are many other moral values about which all cultures everywhere agree. Now, where did this universal sense of morality come from if there is no God? You can’t explain this universal moral sense throughout history as just being a social contract for the selfish benefit of everyone. That argument falls apart. There is something innate in everyone everywhere which we could call a basic moral code of right and wrong. Where did this internal sense of morality come from if there is no God?

There are so many evidences or clues that make it reasonable to believe in the existence of God, and I’ve just mentioned a few this morning. While it’s true I can’t prove to you that God exists, it’s also true you can’t disprove it. So whatever conclusion you reach when it comes to the question of Does God exist? is at some

level a matter of faith. But in the case of Christianity, it's not blind faith we have in the existence of God. Instead, it's a reasonable faith.

The great French physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal once put this way when he wrote, "The very evidences of our faith as Christians are of such a nature that they make as much as sense, or more, as evidence to the contrary, so that it is not reason that causes people to reject it but malice of the heart." In other words, the real reason some people reject the faith is because they just don't *want* to believe in the truth of Christianity. And it's not reason that causes them to reject it. Is that where you are today, my friend?

Believing that God exists and knowing Him personally are two very different things. You can believe in the existence of God, but that doesn't mean you know Him in a personal way. It's like the difference in believing the Rocky Mountains exist and actually skiing in those majestic mountains in Colorado yourself. The personal encounter makes all the difference in the world.

Well, how exactly do you develop a relationship with someone who is invisible, with a Person who leaves clues around but remains somewhat mysterious and elusive in many ways? I wish we had the time this morning to explore this whole idea in greater detail, but I will have to limit my remarks to the following observations and a story I'll share with you. Perhaps it will give you an insight to what I'm talking about and how you can explore a relationship with God yourself.

As you know, I'm in the middle of a very difficult season in my life after the death of my wife Lorie back in November. And I can honestly say that if it wasn't for my relationship with God I would be in utter despair. If all there is to our existence is this world and there is no God and there is no afterlife, then the death of Lorie is the absolute worst thing that could have possibly ever happened in my life, and there is no hope of ever seeing her again. It is only because I believe that God exists and that He loves me and He has a good plan and purpose for both Lorie and for me that I can face this great tragedy and make my way into the future. Frankly, I don't know how people deal with this kind of loss if they don't have faith.

I can't tell you how many times God has shown up in subtle but powerful ways in the last two months to give me comfort and assurance in the midst of my deep sorrow. Conversations I've had with people, timely emails or cards I've received that had just the right words I needed, and amazing "coincidences" have all been signposts that God hasn't lost track of me and that He cares about my sadness and the difficulty I'm facing. As I close, I want to share one of those experiences with you now.

On Christmas Eve after one of the worship services here at the church, a woman came up to me in the lobby. I had never seen her before, and I can't remember her

name. She said she was visiting from out of town, and she also said, “I was very moved by your story about losing your wife, and I think God wants me to share something with you.”

I told her I was all ears. She continued, “Several years ago, my mother died. And after she died, I struggled with some regret that I hadn’t done enough, or said enough, and there were things I wish I had asked her before she passed. But now she was gone, and the weight of those regrets and worries was heavy on my heart.

“One day a couple of weeks after she died, I drove to my father’s house to cook him dinner and get him settled for the night. After I helped him get ready for the evening, I drove back to my home a few miles away. As I drove down the road, the regrets I mentioned were weighing on my heart. But as I was driving, I heard my mother’s voice. It wasn’t in my head; I actually heard her speaking. And she, ‘Oh dear, I’m so beyond all that now. You let it go too.’”

Then the woman added, “I think that’s what Lorie wants to say to you tonight, Peter.”

I was blown away, because I had been feeling some of those same regrets. I never got to take Lorie to Machu Picchu, or to Paris, or to northern Italy where she wanted to go before she died. I forgot to ask her where all the love letters and notes I’d written over the years are. And I wondered if I had told her enough just now much I loved her and how grateful I was for our life together.

The words of this woman were a gift to me from God. It was a message from Him and from Lorie that I could let it all go. You know, that word “beyond” had a double meaning for me. It meant that Lorie was beyond all the things I wish I had done in the sense that it was now in the past, so I should let it go. And it also meant that Lorie was beyond all that in the sense she is now in heaven and she is with Jesus. And all those unresolved matters are small potatoes in the light of eternity. Lorie is in the arms of God now, and she is free and whole and caught up in the loving embrace of the Lord. So I can let go of all those worries.

What a precious Christmas gift God gave me in this brief encounter. It completely changed my celebration of the birth of Christ.

Does God exist? I believe He does with all my heart, and He showed up for me on Christmas Eve. And my prayer for you is that you’ll come to know God personally in a deeper way in 2017 than you’ve ever known Him before. Don’t be afraid to ask the hard questions. God’s got the answer, and He’s right there if you seek Him. He loves you more than you can know. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. xvi.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview on Salon.com, <http://www.salon.com/books/int/2006/08/07/collins>. Cited by Tim Keller in *The Reason for God*, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.