

“Conversations with an Atheist—The Case for God”

Today we're finishing up this message series called "Conversations with an Atheist." Throughout it we've tried to address the criticisms of contemporary atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris who are saying that religion is toxic, it's a delusion, it's dangerous and it should be eliminated all together. This series has been an attempt to have a conversation with these contemporary atheist, to see some of their criticisms and wrestle with some of the truth in them, but at the same time point out where they've got it wrong. We've tried to do that in a way that is open, thoughtful, loving and authentic.

Today we wrap up by dealing with the core issue: Does God exist? How can we as modern, contemporary people, intelligent people, possibly believe that there is a God? But before we jump in, I need to say that the decision to be an atheist is as much a decision of faith as the decision to believe in God. You're not going to find 100% proof either way for the assertions of the atheist or the believer. You're going to find that the arguments given require a similar amount of faith on either side. So what we each have to do is weigh the evidence and make a choice. To say, "As I weigh the evidence, I find myself compelled to put my faith in this idea..." that there is no God, or that there is a God.

Dawkins has said directly in his book that he wants to convince you to be an atheist. I want to tell you that through this last 6 weeks of messages, my hope has been to lead you to a point where you choose to be a believer in God and a follower of Jesus Christ.

When I think about the existence of God and proof of God's existence I think about three broad categories. And the first of those categories has to do with **nature and the origins of the universe and life itself**. Human beings have always been fascinated by our origins. We're always asking, "Where did we come from?" At a family level we love to look at our family history. We go back up our family tree and do genealogical studies to find out where we came from. What country did our ancestors originate in? How did we get here?

Scientists have developed a whole field of study just trying to understand the origins of our universe. How did everything that exists come to be? The origins of the universe. Now I talked about this in the first message in this series so I'm not going to go into detail again. You can download that message from our website. But I will take a minute and bullet-point this idea.

Now scientists will tell us that as they look back through time and try to speculate on how the universe came into being that the most recent theory is the Big Bang theory. You may have learned about it in school or read about it since then. The Big Bang theory tells us that way back 14 billion years ago, give or take 5 or 10 billion years, the universe had its beginning. The universe, everything that exists, started with something the size of the head of a pin, some say it was smaller than that, others say a little larger like the size of a nickel. We don't exactly know what was there in the beginning, but what scientists will tell us is that there was a massive explosion, a Big Bang, and out of that Big Bang, out of nothing, everything came to be. And to this day 15 billion years later, galaxies are still being hurled through space at an astronomical speed away from the center of that explosion.

I have to admit that that's an interesting theory, and for the most part it makes sense to me. It's a marvelous idea. Except that I have some big questions. Like, what was this first chunk sitting in? And what came before it? Where did it come from? It didn't come from nowhere. And what caused that first chunk to explode? Science tells us that an action that takes place has to have something to start it. It has to. It's one of the laws of science. Who, or what pulled the trigger or lit the fuse? When I ask these questions, they point me to God. I can't help myself. Scientists have theories to answer to those questions, but they admit that they really don't know. It all seems to point to God.

You see, science doesn't dispute God's existence. More and more science is pointing to God's existence. In fact 40% of all scientists believe in a personal God, the God of Christianity. And an even larger number of scientists believe in a higher being or higher power.

I believe that the overwhelming evidence of design in the universe points to God. I heard a Harvard Physicist, Michael Guillen, speak several years ago. He is an award-winning Physics professor at Harvard University and has also been the science editor for ABC News. He talked about how more and more scientists are seeing increasing evidence for the existence of design in the universe. And if there is design present then there is a designer.

Here are a few of examples of design in our universe: The Big Bang theory. If the force of that initial explosion was just a teensy bit more or less the universe as we know it wouldn't exist. If that blast was a teensy bit more powerful then the universe would have pulled itself apart. If it was a teensy bit less powerful it would have

collapsed on itself a long time ago. What is teensy? 1 part in 10 to the 59th power. That's **1 part in 10 with 59 zeros**. Miniscule. It's like it was perfectly done.

Then there's water. Water is the only substance in the universe that expands when it freezes. Everything else gets smaller when it gets cold. As water cools down it shrinks like everything else, but as soon as it begins to freeze it starts to expand. It's the only substance in the universe that does that. That little quirk makes all the difference in the world. Because if that didn't happen ice would be heavier than water, ice would sink and all of our oceans would freeze from the bottom up. It's like water was designed that way.

The planet earth seems to be designed to sustain life. Scientists call this the anthropic principle. If our planet was a foot in either direction from its current orbit around the sun, life couldn't exist. If our atmosphere was 1% different in its composition you would not be able to breathe.

Then there's the carbon atom. It also has some interesting quirks. It has a very quirky attraction to oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen. Nobody knows why it's that way, it just is. But if it weren't for that little quirk, there would be no organic matter, there would be no you.

There are dozens more quirks in our world and in our universe like that. And more and more scientists are saying that these quirks seem to indicate intentionality in our universe. Science by itself simply can't explain these quirks. This Harvard physicist even went on to say that the more we learn about the universe, the harder it gets to explain the universe without God, the designer behind it all. Genesis 1:1 is what Christians have said all along. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

When I think about life evolving on our planet, it's mysterious and wonderful to think about evolution and that process. But at the same time I wonder, "How was it that all the elements came together on this planet in order to sustain life? How did those first amino acids come together to form cells that had the hardware and software to reproduce itself? And how did the first couple of cells come together to form the first multi-cellular organism? And how was it that at some point human begins developed and had consciousness? All these are questions that point me to a creator, a designer. Scientists who are people of faith point out that the chances of all this happening randomly are beyond reason. They point more to the existence of God, than of random chance. One who was behind this process. Science, scientists, scientific discovery all point me toward God, God's existence, God's design, God's meticulousness.

Nature and science point me to believe in God. But so do a couple of other things. Like, **what it means to be human**. That I can think...about you, about me, about God. That I can feel. I feel love, sometimes I feel anger, I feel a sense of purpose, a sense of right and wrong. These are a part of who I am and I believe they point to the fact that I have a soul. There is something more to me than my body.

Richard Dawkins would say that all these things are just chemical reactions in my brain along with electrical impulses in certain specialized cells in my brain. Dawkins would say that you are a highly complex bio-computer. You might think that when you hold your child in your arms and you love them so much that it hurts, that's real. Dawkins would say it's nothing more than the wash of chemicals across your brain. There really isn't a you, you are just chemical and electrical impulses. That, to me, defies reason.

The theologian would say that there is a soul. There is a you. You have the capacity to reason and think and know God and experience love because there is something in you that goes beyond the chemical and electrical impulses of your brain. Dawkins would ask, "What proof do you have?" I would say things like recent science on the concept of hope. Prisoners of war die without hope, even when they have all they need to survive. Cancer patients die without hope, even though their cancer is treatable. The philosopher Nietzsche said, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*."

Inside we have a need for meaning and purpose. That's true in any job we do, any career we choose. Individually we have this longing for meaning that gives us hope. Why do you have that longing? Dawkins would say it's a remnant of your evolutionary development. Or is it that you have a soul that was designed to have meaning in life? Is it that there is a God who created you for some purpose? And the reason you feel a need for a purpose is that you were created to have a need for purpose. And God is there to guide us into that purpose. When we see our need for purpose, for hope, I see our soul, where God has imprinted in us the desire to pursue something of meaning, and that he has given direction toward that goal. The very need we have for hope and meaning point us to God who gives us hope beyond our hopeless situations, and meaning that fuels our lives.

Then as humans we also have a moral vision, or a moral authority. I believe that one of the ways we experience God is the sense of right and wrong inherent within us. Now there are many things that we think are right or wrong because of the society we live in or the way our parents raised us. In some societies people don't

wear clothes. In this society you're arrested if you don't wear clothes. That's an ethic that comes from our culture. There are some learned values, but in almost every culture and every society on every continent there is a sense of certain things that are right and wrong that are agreed upon by everyone. They are a higher law. They make no sense if there is no God.

If there is no God then we live according to the laws of Darwin—survival of the fittest. We live according to a plan where we conquer others and we only take for ourselves and hoard things away. But I don't buy that because many of these things that we say are right go against our self-preservation instinct.

Last week we gathered hundreds and hundreds of cans of soup to take to Crosslines. You gave up something to give to others. Many of you give up time to help people in all kinds of ways. Our own Jim Gant is giving huge chunks of his life to help people in Miami to rebuild after last year's flood. He's leading the way in leading others to help clean out black mold and muck. Why would we do that if we're just driven by self-preservation? Something in us tells us that it is right to help others even when it costs us something. To me that points to the existence of God who formed a soul in each of us that transcends our biology and moves counter to the forces of evolution, even if sometimes it means laying down your life in order to help somebody else.

These things about us as human beings point me to God.

A third area that points me to believe in the existence of God is **our human experiences of God**. As far back as time goes where human beings recorded their thoughts and feelings we find them talking about someone beyond themselves. In the writings on the walls of caves we find them talking about God. In every culture and civilization, using different stories and different myths and different names they all describe the same thing—an experience of something beyond themselves, an experience of another presence, an experience of God.

The Bible is the story of the experience of that other, of God. It's a story that goes back 3,600 years. Abraham at the age of 75 heard God speak to him saying, "Abraham, I want you to leave everything you're familiar with and I want you to go to a land you've never been to before." He went! Because he experienced and believed he heard from the God that had created all things.

Moses experienced God and God's call on his life to do something very hard, very difficult, seemingly impossible. God said to him, "Go, lead my people out of slavery and to the land I promised." And he did it! He sacrificed everything and put his life on the line because he believed that God spoke to him. He experienced God.

The prophets experienced God in such a way that they were driven to speak out against injustice toward people. It cost many of them their lives, but they couldn't stop doing what they knew God had called them to do. Why? An experience of God!

Paul was persecuting Christians one minute, hating everything they stood for, and then the next minute he has an experience of God. That experience led him in totally different direction. Instead of persecuting Christians he became the most influential spreader of Christianity in the world at that time. He experienced God.

You've experienced God in all kinds of ways. I've experienced God in all kinds of daily ways. His comfort, his direction, his guidance, his challenge on my life, his correction when I've gone off track. His affirmation when I'm heading in the right direction. I experience God in my life, and you do too.

And I've experienced God in death as well. Several years ago I was sitting with an older woman who was dying. She was lucid and conversational. And then she'd say, "There they are again, aren't they beautiful?" I said, "Aren't what beautiful?" "The angels, they keep coming, and I know it's about my time to go. They're so beautiful." She died later that week. Or the woman who came to me last year hesitantly, almost embarrassed, because she needed to talk to someone to get a gut check. She had a very close friend who had died and whom she missed terribly. And one evening, as she lay in bed, she was overcome with his presence. He was there and not just in a dream, something more. He didn't say anything, just gave this unmistakable peace. As if God wanted her to know that he was all right, he was with God.

We have these God-incidences, the feelings of his presence in the face of beauty, of birth, of death. There's just this sense that there is something more.

I want to end with two words. First a word to those of you who are believers. Jesus knew that his followers would always live out their faith in the proximity and presence of people who were not believers. He knew that there would be people who would be skeptical, people who would have been burned by religious people in their past, people who wouldn't follow easily because they had intellectual issues with faith in general. Jesus knew that some people would have a very hard time believing for a variety of reasons.

Jesus knew that there would be people like Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. What did Jesus tell us to do with people like this? Was it to bash them, call them stupid, get personal, chuckle among ourselves at how they'll face hell when they die? Is that what Jesus told us to do? No. People who struggle

with the faith won't be won to the faith through any that. They won't even be won by having better philosophical evidence. Jesus knew how they would be won to the faith—by seeing your compelling love. He said, **“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, NRSV)**. Jesus said, **“I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful...Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:27-37, NIV)**. Compelling love.

Believers, do you get the picture? The world is looking for a compelling love. I wonder if they will see it in you, or will they only see judgementalism, a hyper-critical spirit, and narrow thinking? I think you're they kind of Christians who can change the world. And when people see how much you love them, and see the kind of integrity and authenticity you have, they would at least be willing to say, “I'm interested in knowing more about what you believe.”

To those of you who may be agnostic or atheist I would offer this word. So many atheists became atheists not just because they've thought it through rationally and logically. Many become atheists in part because they're reacting to some form of religion, some form of Christianity. Many atheists choose to become atheists because they are rejecting a certain idea about God. When people tell me they are atheists, or struggle with believing in God, I say, “Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Because if your idea about God is that he's an angry old man, who gives cancer to children, and tells his followers to fly airplanes into buildings, and is threatened by scientific discovery. I have to say that I don't believe in that God either.”

But if, by God, you mean the God revealed in Jesus Christ, I absolutely believe in him. The God of compassion, and power, the God of truth and justice. The God of second chances and forgiveness. Yes, I believe in that God.

I believe in that God, not just for the reasons I've talked about today, but because I look at my life and realize that I am what I am because I've chosen to be a follower. That I am a better man, a better husband, a better dad, a better son, a better brother, a better friend because I've chosen to follow the God that I see evidence of in so many ways.

As a boy, I was rebellious, and angry, I had no conscience, I hurt so many people, did so much damage to people and property. Honestly I could not wait to leave the God of my parents. I didn't believe, and didn't want to. Why would I want to believe in a being whose sole purpose was to spoil my fun? I couldn't wait to abandon my parents' faith. But what I found is that the further I went from God, the lonelier I felt, the angrier I got, the worse life became, the more disconnected everything seemed. And it was as I gradually returned to God, who was waiting for me all along, that things began to make sense, and I didn't feel lonely, and I discovered a measure of peace, and of joy. He changed me and I don't want to ever give that back.

Listen, it requires faith to become either an atheist or a believer. In the end, either way, you're making a faith decision. In the end, you're deciding if everything you see is an accident, or was there a mind behind it all? Are you as a human being merely a biomechanical machine, or do you have a soul? Is life ultimately meaningless, or is it filled with purpose and a calling to fulfill? Is everything coincidence, or are there moments of God-incidence? Is there only death at the end, or is there life after death? You decide this. I want us to listen to a song by Nicole Nordeman called “What If?” I think it's an honest conversation with those who struggle to believe. Listen closely...

As for me, when I look at all the evidence from nature, from our experience of our humanity, and from my own personal experience, I find myself compelled to believe in a God who knows us by name, who loves us, shows us mercy, has a purpose and a plan for our lives and when this life is over has a place waiting for us in heaven. Richard Dawkins wrote his book hoping to convince you to be an atheist; these messages have been my attempt to convince you to put your trust in God. The God who created you, who knows you by name, who has purpose for your life and life after your death. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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