

The Skeptic and Faith

Intro

Lisa Baker, a 20 year old who is disenchanted with religion, still seeking, says, “*All I want is Reality. Show me God. Tell me what He is really like. Help me to understand why life is the way it is, and how I can experience it more fully and with greater joy. I don’t want empty promises. I want the real thing. And I’ll go wherever I find that truth system.*”

Lisa is like a lot of people who want reality and want to experience life more fully and with meaning. She’s a skeptic looking for answers. Basically people are looking for truth and will go anywhere to find the truth, as long as they have an open mind.

Healthy Skepticism

But I would like to talk about a healthy skepticism. In the Bible some of the world’s greatest people of faith started out as skeptics. Notice how many of them asked something like: “How can I know that this unbelievable thing you’re telling me is true?”

- Jeremiah questioned God and brought a case before Him (Jer. 12).
- The apostles initially doubted that Jesus would actually rise from the dead as he had said he would do so. Jesus had to show them the evidence, especially Thomas (Luke 24:37-40 & John 20:24-31).
- Perhaps the most salient case is Paul, who once doubted Jesus so strongly that he devoted himself to persecuting his believers (Acts 8:1-3).

A more recent skeptic was Lee Strobel. Sometime ago I went to see the movie *The Case for Christ*. It’s about the story of Lee Strobel who was an atheist and became a believer. He said, “*For much of my life I was a skeptic. In fact, I considered myself an atheist. To me there was far too much evidence that God was merely a product of wishful thinking, of ancient mythology, of primitive superstition.*” (The Case for Christ, 1998, pg. 13). Yet he came to admit there was a hidden reason for his skepticism about God and Christianity; “*I had read just enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism – a fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument. Sure, I could see some gaps and inconsistencies, but I had a strong motivation to ignore them: a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to abandoned if I were ever to change my views and become a follower of Jesus*” (ibid).

Accepting a challenge from his wife, however he launched into a thorough investigation concerning God, the Bible and Jesus Christ. He said, “*I plunged into the case with more vigor than with any story I have ever pursued. I applied the training I had received at Yale Law School as well as my experience as legal affairs editor of the Chicago Tribune, and over time the evidence of world history, of science, of philosophy and of psychology began to point to the unthinkable.*”

The unthinkable for Strobel meant reluctantly accepting he had been wrong. He spent two years carefully gathering evidence as if he were conducting a court trial, including interviewing 13 leading scholars with impeccable credentials. The results stunned him, and he grudgingly accepted that the Bible was true and that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. As a consequence, he mentions in his book, he became a Christian.

Good Skepticism

There is good skepticism especially when one wants to know the truth. But good skepticism is having an open mind without dogmatic presuppositions or biases.

The word “skeptic” is derived from a Greek word meaning “*to examine.*” Healthy skepticism examines and follows the evidence to where it leads. This healthy skepticism is open-minded rather than closed-minded; because getting to the truth is more important than proving one’s side or one’s presuppositions.

Skepticism can actually be a good place to begin one’s spiritual journey than an emotional experience or a blind leap of faith.

The strongest faith is usually the one that “examines” the evidence. May I even go as far to say that good skepticism can actually be a safer base to begin one’s spiritual journey than an emotional experience? Eventually

the questions one avoids will return probably during the most challenging times of one's life. The honest and best way is to meet them head on.

God welcomes skeptics

-In Isaiah 1:18 we read, "*Come now, and let us reason together,*" says the Lord. We are invited to reason.

-Also in Isaiah 41:21 says, "*Present your case,*" the Lord says. "*Bring fourth your strong arguments.*"

-And in Job 38 God reasons with Job "*Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding?*"

The Judeo-Christian Scriptures present a God who is too big to be shaken by skepticism. I believe that exercising skepticism is a normal healthy part of using our God-given ability to reason. The faith of a Christian is not afraid of open, honest inquiry; and no truth fears investigation.

I would like to look at the most basic and foundational question that is so important to life.

Where did Everything Come from – Including Me?

What or who created all this stuff we see in the world and universe? What is the best explanation for the origin of the universe? I believe that atheism is inadequate as a worldview because it cannot explain the origin and existence of the universe. The fine tuning and order of the universe and the wonder and complexities of life cries out for an explanation. The atheist, however, is unable to provide a consistent explanation for the origin of the universe.

If they argue that matter is eternal, they are going against modern science which states that the universe had a beginning. If the atheist affirms that the universe had a beginning, then he or she must account for what caused it. Either way, the atheist cannot adequately explain the universe and the origin of complex forms of life.

Science has no laws or observations to show how something could have come from nothing. Science can observe only what is in existence and study the formations but the origin of the universe is outside of its domain. The ultimate origin of the universe is impossible for science to study, as Dr. Milton Rothman (well-known physicist) states, "*there is no way of obtaining evidence concerning a prior existence*" (i.e., before the universe began).

Dr. Eric Carlson (Astronomer): "*The universe was started by a highly ordered event rather than a chaotic event.*"
Dr. George Smoot (Astronomer, from NASA): "*Cosmologists are very tempted to think someone had a design or plan for the universe.*"

Dr. Robert Wilson, one of the discoverers of the microwave radiation that is still emanating from the moment of the beginning of the universe, stated: "*Certainly there was something that set it all off. Certainly, if you are religious, I can't think of a better theory of the origin of the universe to match with Genesis.*"

I read a great quote about Albert Einstein. The quote comes from a scientific relativity theorist by the name of Charles Misner.

Misner writes, "*I do see the design of the universe as essentially a religious question--that is, one should have some kind of respect and awe for the whole business. It is very magnificent and should not be taken for granted. In fact, I believe that is why Albert Einstein had so little use for organized religion--although he strikes me as a very religious man. Einstein must have looked at what the preachers said about God and felt they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined, and they were just not talking about the Real Thing.*"

At one point in his life Einstein said, "*The scientist is possessed by the sense of the universe causation...his religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.*"

Einstein was intrigued by the greatness of the creator and stated that he is far beyond our thinking or imagination. In his book on Albert Einstein, author Walter Isaacson told of a dinner party in Berlin where everybody assumed Einstein was an atheist. Everyone was stunned when Einstein responded in the flowing way: *“No, I have a deep feeling of faith, a deep religiosity that comes from my appreciation of the way the Lord made the universe.”*

He continued and said, *“I was like a child walking into a library, and you see the books and you know somebody must have written them, and you see them ordered and you know somebody must have ordered them, and there’s a sense of awe that’s manifest in that, where you kind of understand that there’s an order underlying everything and the more you appreciate it, the more humble you become in the fact of it...”*

As science continues its research into the 21st century it has yet to come up with a natural explanation for the universe's origin. It would seem that the supernatural explanation found in Hebrews 11:3 is the only best one we have: *“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”* This kind of faith is reasonable.

Christianity answers this fundamental question and that’s why I believe in God. The Judeo-Christian God fits the picture so well of the Creator.

British astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle too recognizes *“The Judaeo-Christian idea of a deity outside the Universe is a unique concept among the world's early religions.”*

Dr. Robert Jastrow a world renowned astrophysicist admits, *“There is no doubt that a parallel exists between the big bang as an event and the Christian notion of creation from nothing.”* Ex Nilho! (something created out of nothing).

Jastrow also said, *“For a scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance he is about to conquer the highest peak as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.”*

What Jastrow is saying is that we need to listen to the theologians. He published a book entitled, *God and the Astronomers*, where he deals with current theories about the creation of the universe, and compares these with the Biblical story of creation, and looks at the role of scientists in increasing our understanding of the universe.

Sharon Begley the science editor for The Wall Street Journal says that relationship between religion and science is undergoing a seismic change. This is how she describes the new discoveries and the impact they are having. She said:

“Astronomers findings-both the new nebulae and novas and the galaxies they spy with their telescopes-are restoring a sense of wonder and even of purpose, in a world at times hostile to both. Instead of leaving less and less room for a Creator who at least once, acted in the world, their findings are acting as an inspiration to and a support for faith.”

Science is limited

Atheists and skeptics often ask for evidence to prove the existence of God. They want tangible, testable evidence that can be verified by the scientific method. Unfortunately for the atheist such a request is the wrong approach. Instead, they should look for evidence consistent with a Transcendent God. What do I mean by transcendent? Well, first the scientific method consists of observation, experimentation, hypothesis, and theory. It is based on the observations of the physical universe and its properties.

Secondly, the scientific method does not consider transcendence - meaning that which exists independent of the universe. Therefore it can't detect what is outside of the physical realm since it is based on observing things inside the natural physical realm.

A third reason is that the Judeo-Christian worldview proclaims a transcendent God who independently exists outside of the material universe. This means that God is not dependent upon the material universe for his existence.

God is Transcendent

Therefore for an atheist who requires evidence inside their materialistic worldview for the non-material transcendent God won't work. He or she is asking for the material evidence of the non-material transcendent God. It is like asking to have a person's love placed into a test tube. Love isn't a physical material thing.

You see, God is transcendent. It means that He exists outside of time and space and the universe. God is the only truly transcendent Being. He created all things on the earth and in the universe, yet He exists above and independent from them. All things are upheld by His mighty power yet He is upheld by Himself alone. The whole universe exists because of Him and for Him.

Colossians 1:16-17 states this, "*For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*"¹⁷ *He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*"

God is far above the universe yet he is near; he is majestic yet approachable; he is to be feared, yet easily to be loved. That is God. He is both transcendent and at the same time immanent.

God is Immanent

Immanent simply means that God is near. God is present with and active in the created order. God is near us, present with us, active on earth and involved in our world. He is present and active in nature, in history, and in peoples' lives. He acts in the universe and in this world.

The incarnation is the supreme example of this because God in Christ became one of us. He took upon Himself human likeness, and lived among humanity.

His work on the cross, along with his resurrection, shows how God took great lengths to restore our relationship to Himself, to allow us to again enjoy His immanence. Our sin magnified His transcendence, but our repentance and faith enables a new and deeper immanence and tangibility of God.

God's love for His creation is so great that we see His immanence overshadowing His transcendence. This becomes clear in His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, as He breaks through the barrier of sin and separation to draw all humanity back into a close, personal relationship. Through Christ God shows all humanity how much He loves us. "*For so loved the world He gave us His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not die but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16).

We see God not only choosing to draw near to His creation but to personally come into the hearts and minds of people who believe in him through the indwelling presence of His Spirit.

I would like to share with you a few examples of how God's immanence has been manifest in the lives of individuals. God is tangible – you can truly experience Him.

James Irwin

James Irwin was an astronaut with the Apollo 15 lunar landing in 1971. On the moon he had a tangible encounter with God. It began when he encountered a problem and he said, "God I need your help right now." Suddenly Irwin experienced the presence of Jesus Christ in a remarkable way, unlike anything he ever felt on earth. The Lord showed him the solution to the problem. His wife Mary said, "He was so overwhelmed at seeing and feeling God's presence so close. At one point he turned around and looked over his shoulder as if He was standing there."

This unusual encounter with Jesus – some 238,000 miles from earth, changed Irwin's life forever.

It is oft-repeated that several of the Apollo astronauts "found God" after their experiences on the moon - astronauts like Charles Duke and Buzz Aldrin.

Another astronaut John Glenn, when he was about 70 years old, returned to space in 1998, traveling on the Discovery Space Shuttle. He said: "*I don't think you can be up here and look out the window as I did the first day and see the Earth from this vantage point, to look out at this kind of creation and not believe in God.*"

Experiencing the tangibility of God

My personal experience: (for details listen to the audio message on the website: goodnewscambridge.com under *Connect*, then *Media* then *Audio Message*: “The Skeptic & Faith.”)

God is tangible, real and you can experience His presence.

BUT you need to seek Him with all your heart.

“Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:12-14).

I like what Pascal said: *“There are only three types of people; those who have found God and serve him; those who have not found God and seek him, and those who live not seeking, or finding him. The first are rational and happy; the second unhappy and rational, and the third foolish and unhappy.”*

I'd rather believe in God and be rational and happy, then foolish and unhappy without God!