

## *Is There a God?*

### **Psalm 19**

John Breon

We're exploring some big questions about ourselves and life and God. We're walking along, poking around, turning over some rocks to see what's there. Last week, we looked at *Does Life Have a Purpose?* Today, we're exploring *Is There a God?*

Asking these kinds of questions and considering the alternatives can be uncomfortable. Can we become Christian while we have questions like these? Can we be Christian and still have questions like these? God allows room for us to have faith. That also leaves room for doubt. "Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me" (Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* 91).

You may think this series isn't for you. But I suspect that at one time or another, we all wonder about questions like these. I know I have. This series can help prepare us to deal with them. You may not feel that it's a struggle to believe. But some of your friends probably do. Some of your family might. These messages, and the supporting material, can give you some resources for listening to people who struggle and for sharing faith with them.

As a teenager, Greg Boyd left the fairly nominal Christianity of his childhood and became an atheist. After a few years, he returned to Christian faith and went on to become a pastor and seminary professor. His father, Edward Boyd, kept resisting the gospel and refused to believe. After some years, Greg proposed that he and his dad deal with questions about Christianity in a series of letters. His dad took him up on the offer. They later compiled their correspondence in a book called *Letters from a Skeptic*. After posing and reading answers to several questions about God and suffering and other struggles, Edward got to the heart of the matter. His letter is worth quoting at length:

Here's the deal, Greg. You have really good answers to all my questions, and I admit that you've to some extent cleared away some of my obstacles to believing in the Christian God, but it's starting to feel like a game to me. You have all these excuses to get God off the hook, and they're pretty impressive excuses, but it seems to me that the burden of proof is on anyone who claims to believe in an all-loving God to show that such a God exists. If you have to do all these theological gymnastics to preserve your faith, maybe it's because your faith is wrong! If God exists, why isn't He more obvious? I could invent a thousand reasons why we can't ever see the man in the moon, but sooner or later a person should suspect that maybe it's because there isn't a man there!

So I can see how all your material is convincing to a person who already believes in the Almighty, but I'm not quite in that position. I've always been inclined to believe that there must be some sort of "higher power" behind everything, but I don't see any evidence that it's a personal being who is all-powerful (in any sense) or gives a rip about humanity. In fact, I don't see how we can claim to know anything about it at all. Maybe we should have dealt with this first, but I told you before I don't have any set, positive system of beliefs. I just raise the questions as they come to me.

So there you have it. Look forward to your response. (pages 61-62)

Do you know anybody like that? Is that where you are?

I'm tempted to say, "Go read Boyd's book to hear the response." But this sermon is about the kinds of responses we can make to such questions.

First, we need to realize that we aren't given and we can't provide absolute certainty. But we have reason enough. Christians have good reason for believing what we believe.

The basic question here is, Is God real and can we know this? The three main ways people answer this are:

- atheism (*a* ["no" or "without"] + *theos* ["god"])
- agnosticism (*a* + *gnosis* [knowledge])

- theism (belief in a god)

Christians are theists. We believe that God is. Even more, we believe specifically in the God revealed in Jesus Christ and that people can know God. While our faith is not *only* rational, it is *at least* reasonable and rational. What are some reasons for believing in the God of Jesus, the God of the Bible?

We might start with existence itself. That anything exists at all is amazing. So we look for a cause. Why do we exist? Why is there a world, a universe? Did the “Big Bang” just happen for no reason or did someone set it off, and if so, who? The Bible simply assumes God’s existence: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3).

The universe’s complexity, order, and operation suggest that someone is behind it and has a purpose for it. There are aspects of the universe that seem to be fine-tuned to allow for life. The earth is the right distance from the sun—not too hot, not too cold, but just right. The force of gravity is such that stars and planets could form and move in relation to each other. The composition of earth’s atmosphere makes it breathable. Some scientists point to the complexity of a single cell or of an organ like the human eye. Christians are committed to some form of “intelligent design.” And we find in the world hints that it is designed for life, for our life.

Greg Boyd’s initial response to his father’s letter I read was to talk about the personal nature of human beings and how that points to a personal God. Humans are self-aware and rational; we are able to love; we’re morally responsible; we long for meaning and significance. That’s what being a person is. It’s strange to think that an impersonal universe or “force” would produce personal beings like us. It’s more likely that our environment answers to the basic features of our personhood.

My contention is that unless our environment is ultimately itself personal, unless the ultimate context in which we live is self-aware, rational, loving, moral, and purposeful, then our cosmic environment does not at all answer to our personhood. In other words, unless there is a personal God who is the ultimate reality within which we exist, then we humans can only be viewed as absurd, tortured freaks of nature; for everything that is essential to us is utterly out of place in this universe. (*Letters from a Skeptic* 63-64)

Another reason, or clue, we have for believing in God is our sense of right and wrong. Across cultures there is a sense of morality, of “ought”—awareness of a moral law and of failure to live up to it. We have a sense of fairness, of justice. If somebody hurts us or takes something from us, we say, “That’s not fair.” Where does this sense of fair play come from? There’s a version of the “Golden Rule” (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) in nearly every culture and religion around the world. Where did that come from? Christians say that *God* is good explanation.

We also believe that we can know God because God reveals himself or makes himself known. Theologians talk about God’s *general revelation* in creation, nature, human conscience, and the kinds of things we’ve been talking about. We see an example of that in the first half of Psalm 19 that begins, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” The sky, the stars, the sun all bear witness to their Creator. There’s an echo here of Genesis 1 where sun, moon and stars are not to be worshipped because they are created and we are to worship the Creator. So nature, creation itself, hints at the Creator. The apostle Paul wrote, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

We also talk about God’s *special revelation*. An example of this is in the second half of Psalm 19 that talks in a variety of ways about God’s word and what it does. God acts and speaks in history, through Israel, in Jesus, through the Church. If what the Bible says about Jesus is true, we can believe God is real and we can know what God is like. We’ll talk more about

this later in the series, but one indicator that Jesus is real and that what he tells us about God is true is the resurrection of Jesus and its historical nature.

None of these “proofs” and reasons we’ve looked at can convince someone who doesn’t want to be convinced. But they can reinforce the faith of someone who does believe and they may help persuade someone who is open to believing.

We have other reasons to believe that go beyond bare logic. There is direct experience of God and the claim to know God, the witness of the Holy Spirit. Many people through history testify to lives changed by God’s power and to having a direct and personal knowledge of God. We believe and keep believing because we trust the witness of God’s Spirit in our hearts.

Blaise Pascal was a famous mathematician and scientist. Among other achievements, he invented one of the first calculating machines. He also defended Christian faith and wrote about spiritual life. After he died, a scrap of paper was found sewn into the lining of his coat. It’s called Pascal’s *Memorial* and it describes one of his experiences of God.

The year of grace 1654,

Monday, 23 November....

From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight,  
FIRE.

GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob  
not of the philosophers and of the learned.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

GOD of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

Your GOD will be my God.

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD.

He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel.

Grandeur of the human soul.

Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you.

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.  
I have departed from him:  
They have forsaken me, the fount of living water.  
My God, will you leave me?  
Let me not be separated from him forever.  
This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one  
that you sent, Jesus Christ.  
Jesus Christ.  
Jesus Christ.  
I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified.  
Let me never be separated from him.  
He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel:  
Renunciation, total and sweet.  
Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.  
Eternally in joy for a day's exercise on the earth.  
Not to forget your words. Amen.  
(<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/memorial.titlepage.html?highlight=pascal#highlight>, accessed 9/18/14)

Christian faith involves our minds and thought. But we can't settle just for intellectual assent to some principles or reasons. In Christian faith we're committed to certain ideas of right and wrong. But we can't settle for just following some rules. We're called to come to God in faith and to commit ourselves to seeking God and walking in God's ways all of our days. We can each experience and know God because of his grace.

After about three years and thirty letters, Edward Boyd was running out of objections. He was beginning to see the truth of Christian faith. Toward the end of this time, he and Greg wrote fewer letters and had more phone conversations. Greg says that with each conversation his father grew less hesitant about committing his life to Christ. Finally, on January 15, 1992, Edward Boyd "gave in" and accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. Here's part of the letter Edward sent Greg following his conversion experience:

Well, as I told you over the phone, I finally “took the leap.” Hallelujah! As I sit here and read over all our correspondence, I still can’t believe how I’ve changed.... The angels whom you say rejoice over this sort of thing are probably giving each other high fives! ...

Looking back on it, it seems that things began to change for me when you convinced me of the Bible’s inspiration and helped me make sense out of hell. I’m not sure why, but I think it was at that point that I really started to “see the light.” Around this time I began to get the distinct impression that my case for skepticism was ultimately a lost cause. I recall being at once confused, a bit scared, but also excited when I came to this realization. Now I’m just excited. It wouldn’t have happened without your persistence, Son, and I want you to know that I love and appreciate you for this.

As you know, I’ve still got a number of questions, and I’m sure we’ll continue to hash these out. But my disposition has completely changed. I’m asking them no longer as a skeptic, but as a believer. ...

Keep in touch and keep me in prayer. I’m reading the Bible a lot lately, and it’s beginning to make a little sense. But any material you can send to help me will be appreciated. Prayer is still tough, but I have a feeling it will probably come with time. I’m not uptight about it. I’m forgiven. (231-32)

Edward Boyd was seventy-three years old when he had this experience. It changed the rest of his life—and eternity.

Are you willing to explore the possibility that God is real and you can know him? Are you ready to help someone else as they explore?