

7 January 2018

The Problem(s) with God: Does God Even Exist?

Job 23:1-9

Questioning God is not a new concept. In the Book of Job, chapter 23, we read Job's own frustrated questioning. We read verses 1-9.

23 Then Job answered:

*² 'Today also my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy despite my groaning.*

*³ O that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!*

*⁴ I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.*

*⁵ I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.*

*⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.*

*⁷ There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.*

*⁸ 'If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;*

*⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.*

As I begin this new sermon series on questions and problems that people have with God, it feels as if I should start with a foundational question: does God even exist? For much of human history, this has been a question that people simply didn't ask – or at least didn't ask openly – but that's changed, hasn't it? Every new religious survey shows a greater percentage of Americans openly rejecting God. Angry professional atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have appeared, and their books *God Is Not Great* and *The God Delusion* have been read (or at least purchased) by millions. Young adults, especially, have been asking piercing questions about this hypothetical deity, and fewer and fewer seem to be satisfied by the answers they are getting. Nearly every family, including my own, has its resident atheist or two.

But the question isn't really new. Theologians have been offering their own proofs of God's existence for centuries. For instance, Thomas Aquinas argued that, inasmuch as everything on earth is caused by something else, and that an unbroken line of causation going back indefinitely is illogical, then there must be a First Cause somewhere. Thus the fact that there is a universe at all indicates that there must be a Creator. This is the Cosmological Argument. Then, William Paley, an Enlightenment philosopher, argued for God from the incredible complexity of the universe. Imagine you were walking along a forest path, he said, and you found a watch ticking away. You wouldn't assume that the watch just happened by chance, would you? No, there must be a watchmaker. Well, the universe is much more complex than that watch, ergo there must be a Universe Maker. This is the Teleological, or Design,

Argument. And before either of these, Anselm of Canterbury proposed the “Ontological Argument.” Briefly, this begins by defining God as “that than which nothing greater can be imagined.” Well, a thing that actually exists is greater than just the idea of that thing, so God *must* exist. If God didn’t, then you could imagine something greater than God, and *that* thing would be God. QED, dude.

So much for the so-called classical arguments for the existence of God. If you like one of them, take it home. No charge. But I’m not going to waste any more time on these. You see, there are two huge problems with all three. First, they have never changed anyone’s mind. They are considered brilliant and persuasive by people who already happened to agree with their conclusion, and no one else. Second, even if they *did* work, what would you have? They’re still light years away from any God worth worshiping. I don’t come to church to worship a First Cause or a celestial Watchmaker, and certainly not That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Imagined. Even if they work, these arguments are worthless.

Now there is one traditional argument that sort of works for me, called the Moral Argument. This one begins with human beings, recognizing that we are peculiar among this planet’s creatures. As a species, we share some illogical convictions. Foremost among these is that there is a reality beyond this earth. Yes, I know that’s the question we’re dealing with today, but the fact is, every human culture throughout time has expressed some form of the religious impulse. Where did that come from? And what about morality? Why do we believe in justice? Why do we believe in the same justice for the weak as for the strong? Why do we honor those who care for the helpless? That’s not normal in nature. Why is it that when we hear about those Dallas police officers who, although they were the targets, ran *into* the line of fire to protect women and children, we nod our heads and say, “Yes! That’s what people should be like!” For that matter, why do humans create art – something that we have consistently done since the first antelope was painted on a cave wall? The Moral Argument takes this sort of observation and suggests that all that might make sense if we had been made by a good and creative God and granted some portion of that God’s goodness and creativity. This requires a leap of faith, but then all the scientific explanations for morality that I’ve heard seem to call for leaps of faith, too. Anyway, like I said, I rather like this one, partly because it doesn’t pretend to *prove* anything, but just argues that belief in God is one reasonable conclusion that intelligent people might come to, and partly because the God it points toward is actually worth worshiping. If you want to examine this argument in more detail, go read the first (and shortest) section of C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*.

But now I want to change focus entirely, because I don’t believe that whether God exists is really the question that people are asking. In the scripture we read today from Job, this devout man is shouting at God from the depths of grief and pain and despair. He demands to know where God is: *‘If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.* It sounds like an atheist battle cry, doesn’t it? *I don’t see any sign that there’s a God!* But it isn’t really. In the context of the book, we see that Job isn’t doubting God so much as he is disappointed in God. If there is a God, then God should be just. This hell that Job is living through is not just. “God? Can you explain yourself? Because if you can’t, God, then I’m through with you.” To make things worse, Job’s three friends – “Comforters,” they call themselves – try to defend God, and those three are pious, sanctimonious weasels who plug their ears whenever Job starts to ask hard questions.

“No! You mustn’t say those things!” Again, Job seems to be saying, “If you three represent God, then let me off here. I want no part of a God who sounds like you.”

Later in this series, I’m going to talk about the problem of God and injustice in the world. For now, though, I just want to point out that what looked like atheism in Job was actually anger at God and God’s representatives. And I think that’s still very often the case. The historian Alister McGrath, in his book *The Twilight of Atheism*, points out that atheism always flourishes most when the Church has grown stodgy, institutionalized, and more concerned about its own position and power than about justice and compassion. People who see a self-centered or corrupt or oppressive Church are likely to respond by rejecting that Church’s God. The atheist in my own family told me once that he began to reject God when he first read about the Crusades. We can even see this statistically. The Pew Religious Landscape Survey was done twice in the early years of the 21st century, once in 2007, then again five or six years later. In that brief time, the percentage of Americans who denied affiliation with any religion went up seven percentage points. That’s an incredible rate of change. And yet, when you looked further in the study, you saw that the number of people who explicitly called themselves “atheist” had remained unchanged in that time, about 7%. It appears that people are rejecting the Church, and are tossing God out along with her.

And why wouldn’t they? If all you knew about the Church was how it appears in the newspapers, if all you ever saw was the way its most prominent leaders behaved, what would you think of that church’s God? If God is the one behind Westboro Baptist Church, waving signs saying, “God Hates Fags,” then who wants him? If God is the one who prompted Cardinals and Bishops to protect the reputation of their hierarchy by quietly moving pedophile priests to new, unsuspecting, congregations, then let me off now. If God is really the God of Jerry Falwell, Jr., calling for all good Christians to start packing heat so we can defend ourselves from Sharia Law, or if God is really the God of President Trump’s spiritual advisor, Paula White, who teaches that God is in the business of blessing rich people with more riches, then I don’t want anything to do God. If any of those deities are God, then – by God! – I’m an atheist, too! If you’re doubting God because you expect more of God than this, then good for you. You should! As religion scholar Karen Armstrong puts it, when the Church becomes invalid, then atheism can be an act of faith.

But here’s the thing: I don’t believe any of those repulsive inventions are God, and I don’t believe the Church is a lost cause. I believe that we exist because a Being beyond this earth is, by nature, Love, and that that Being created all that is in order to express that love. I believe that we humans have been granted a particular glimpse of that love, just enough to make us long for something more than this world and to be dissatisfied with anything less. As Augustine prayed, “You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

No, I can’t prove any of that logically or scientifically. All I can say is there are other kinds of knowing than scientific. To those who doubt the existence of God, my only rational argument is that I think belief is as reasonable a conclusion as unbelief – again, read C. S. Lewis – and that even if it isn’t, I’d rather believe wrongly in a God of justice and mercy than try to live without that foundation. And to those who already believe, I have this to say. What happens next is on us: when the Church starts to look like the God that we claim we believe in, when our own lives of mercy and compassion and justice belie the false gods invented by our culture, then we will need no further arguments for the existence of God.