

Why I'm a Christian

Week 1: God

"Why do you believe in God, yet you don't believe in the easter bunny or the tooth fairy?"

That's what he said to me.

I was a college sophomore. He was a grad student.

He said, "Why believe one and not the others? Why would you base your life on something that can't be proven?"

I was ill-equipped, as a college sophomore, to deal with questions from a grad student who was dealing with his own sense of inadequacy by trying to make himself seem intellectually superior to Christians. I just shook my head, told him he was being ridiculous and walked away. I knew something was wrong with his premise but I couldn't articulate why.

That's what this series is about: Not what we believe, necessarily, but why we believe it. Why do we believe that Christianity is true? We believe in a God that has existed forever, who created us and is leading all of his creation towards his desired end. Are we crazy? We believe that a man named Jesus rose from the dead 2000 years ago. We believe that the collection of writings that we now refer to as The Bible are not simply ancient man-made writings but are divine rather than human in origin. But why do we believe those things?

I kept being bothered by that interaction. "Why would you base your life on something that can't be proven?"

So a couple of days later, I went to one of my pastors and I said, "How do we know that God exists?" He looked at me and said, "How do you know that you exist?" and I thought, "I am never going to win an argument with that grad school guy."

I want to show you today how the Bible answers that question, how do we know that God exists? As we talk about why we believe the things that we do as Christians, this seems like the logical place to start. Why do we believe that God exists at all?

Turn to Romans 1.

Romans 1:16-25

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. **17** For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." **18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. **19** For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. **21** For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. **22** Claiming to be wise, they became fools, **23** and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. **24** Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of

their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, **25** because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

As we start to answer this question about the knowledge of God and trace Paul's argument here, I do think we need to clarify something first.

Looking back on my interaction with the grad student when I was in college, now I can more clearly see a false assumption that he held. This idea of living life based on proof. The truth is, that's not how anyone lives their life, secular, atheist, or devoutly religious. It's not possible to live a life exclusively based on proof.

I've heard this belief called "exclusive rationality." I've also heard it called "logical positivism." It's the idea that we should only believe what can be tested and proven. It is shot through with problems though. For one, it can't meet its own standard. The statement, "We should only believe what can be tested and proven" cannot be tested and proven, so why should we believe it?

Second, while we might be able to demonstrably prove many things, there are a great many more that we cannot. Here is how pastor and author Tim Keller:

We cannot prove what we believe about justice and human rights, or that all people are equal in dignity and worth, or what we think is good and evil human behavior. If we used the same standard of evidence that many secular people use to reject belief in God, no one would be able to justify much of anything.

--Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*

For someone who insists on this line of reasoning, hit him in the face and when he objects simply say that because right and wrong can't be proven I don't base my life on them. So why do you believe in right and wrong but not the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy?

You can't prove that you exist. You can't prove that your senses work correctly. We cannot test our senses without using them and therefore assuming their reliability. You might be hooked up to the Matrix.

There is virtually no one in the sphere of philosophy who believes this line of reason anymore, because it so quickly falls apart upon inspection. And yet, most secular people fall into it's thinking by assuming that religious people are living by blind faith, while secular and nonbelievers in God are grounding their position in evidence and reason.

In one of our recommended reads for the series, Tim Keller says this...

Reason is a crucial and irreplaceable way to help us with competing beliefs. But it is impossible to claim that we should believe only what is proven and that therefore, since religion can't be proven, we shouldn't embrace it. All of us have things we believe - including things we would sacrifice and even die for - that cannot be proven. We should, therefore, stop demanding that belief in God meet a standard of universally acknowledged proof when we don't apply that to the other commitments on which we base our lives.

--Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*

Here is how Neil Shenvi - theoretical chemist studied at Princeton, UC Berkeley, Yale, and Duke, says it:

[Arguments for God's existence] should not be viewed as 'proofs' of God but as 'evidence' for God. Why? Because 'proof' is generally relegated to the field of mathematics. Speaking as a professional scientist myself, I can attest that scientists rarely demand 'proof' that theories are true. Instead, scientists and those in many other fields such as economics, medicine, and archaeology seek the best explanation for the evidence that they have. When considering arguments for God's existence, we should not demand 'proof' but should instead ask ourselves, "Which worldview is the best explanation of the evidence provided?"

--Neil Shenvi

That's the category we are operating in. Not proof, but evidence. With that said, we find in Romans 1 that Paul asserts we can *know* God exists. He asserts that enough evidence is given for us to have the knowledge of God's existence. Look back at vs 19-20:

Romans 1:19-20

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

What can be known about God, meaning his eternal power and divine nature, God has shown to us through what has been made.

The word there for 'made plain' can be translated "made evident". God has put the evidence out there. And remember that is what we are looking for. Not proof, but evidence. Which theory, or worldview, is the best explanation of the evidence?

Paul is saying if you look out at the natural world, nature, the created world, you can see a lot of evidence that God exists, his divine power and his divine nature. There are some good arguments to be made this way. These arguments say, "If you look out there in the natural world, that is strong evidence that there is a God." Many of them are very old. They've been redone and reworked and today we have only gotten more evidence and examples as we've gathered more information about the world.

The two that probably would be the most tied to these verses would be the *cosmological argument* and the *teleological argument*. The cosmological argument goes like this:

I. Cosmological argument - "an argument from something rather than nothing"

The argument goes like this:

- 1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
- 2) The universe began to exist.
- 3) Therefore, the universe has a cause.

This one goes back all the way to Aristotle. It's the question of why there is something rather than nothing, and where did the original something come from?

If the world began 14 billion years ago with a Big Bang, where did the materials that caused the Big Bang come from? You can't keep going back in infinite regress into nothingness. Eventually something has to come from somewhere. "Nothingness" can't just explode.

In his book *God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins admits this is a problem. He says, "Darwin's theory works for biology, but not for cosmology (or, ultimate origins)." And, "Cosmology is waiting on its Darwin."

In other words, he thinks that while they have explained how life took shape on the earth, he admits they still have no idea where life itself, or the materials that produced life, came from. Because it is self-evident that nothing x nobody can't equal everything.

One Christian philosopher used this analogy: Suppose you were hiking through the forest and came upon a ball lying on the ground. You would wonder how it came to be there. If your hiking buddy said to you, "Forget about it! It just exists. There was nothing and now there is this." you would think he was either joking or just wanted you to keep moving. No one would take seriously the idea that the ball just exists without any explanation. Now notice that increasing the size of the ball until it becomes the size of the universe does nothing to either provide, or remove the need for, an explanation of its existence.

Whatever begins to exist has a cause.

The universe began to exist.

Our universe has a cause.

Is it proof? No. It's evidence, evidence that must be accounted for in whatever theory we ascribe to. It's one of the ways that the knowledge of God is made plain since the creation of the world, as Romans 1 says.

II. Teleological argument - "an argument from design"

- 1) Our world has a design.
- 2) Anything with a design has a designer.
- 3) Therefore, the world has a designer.

Teleos means purpose. Our creation appears very finely tuned, for a purpose. The more we learn about this, the more amazing it becomes. This is an argument that discovery has made even more compelling recently.

Life on earth depends on multiple factors that are so precise that if they were off by even a hair, life could not exist. They call it the Goldilocks principle: things are "just right" for human life.

It makes me think of the classic film *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: Secret of the Ooze* from 1991. One of the turtles, Raphael, has been kidnapped. And the other 3 turtles are going to break him out. When they show up to the place he's being held, they see no guards. One of them says, "It sure is quiet." "Yeah a little too quiet." Then they beat up a few helpless foot soldiers and one of them says, "Well that was easy." "Yeah a little too easy." And then they see their friend Raphael and one of them says, "Look, there's Raph!" And one responds, "Yeah, a little too Raph!" And 9 year old me thought that was the best comedic writing that the world had ever been blessed with. It turns out, it was a

trap. The point is, even Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles know they should be suspicious when they come upon conditions that seem too convenient.

- For example: The makeup of our atmosphere. (78% Nitrogen, 21% Oxygen, 1% Argon, 0.04% Carbon Dioxide.)
- If some of those levels were even slightly off—for example, if the level of oxygen dropped by 6% we would all suffocate; if it rose by 4%, our planet would erupt into a giant fireball. And we'd all die.
- Or, if the CO₂ were just a little higher (let's say, 3%) or a just a little bit lower (say, 0.01%), then the earth would either become an oven or have no atmosphere at all. And we'd all die.
- Or this: The water molecule is the only molecule whose solid form (ice) is less dense than its liquid form. Which means that when it freezes it floats. If ice did not float, it would sink to the bottom and the whole ocean would eventually freeze from the bottom up and... we would all die.
- Or if we were 2% closer to the sun, the planet would be too hot for water to exist. And... we'd all die.
- And then there's tilt of the earth, which is set at an ideal 23.5 degrees, which we've learned is perfect for temperatures and tides and such. You've probably never thought about it, but if it was not tilted, temperatures would be extreme and we'd all die.
- We've learned that if Jupiter wasn't the size and in the orbit it is, astronomers predict that there would be 10,000x the number of asteroid strikes right here on earth, and we'd all die. Without Jupiter, our planet would be pummeled with asteroids and life could never exist. Let's give it up for Jupiter you guys.
- Then we put up our telescopes and pull out our microscopes and we find the same complexity in the cell and atomic structure

Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, says:

DNA, with its phosphate-sugar backbone and intricately arranged organic bases, stacked neatly on top of one another and paired together at each rung of the twisted double helix, seems an utterly improbable molecule to have 'just happened'—especially since DNA seems to possess no intrinsic means of copying itself...How could a cosmic accident ever result in something of this digital elegance of a DNA strand?

–Francis Collins, *The Language of God*

One philosopher said It's like thinking an explosion in an ink factory could inadvertently produce the collected works of Shakespeare. It's all so intelligently organized.

The late Stephen Hawking said in one of his later books:

The laws of science, as we know them at present, contain many (precise ratios), like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the masses of the proton and the electron... The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life.

--Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*

The argument against this evidence typically some version of, "We're just lucky. In a universe as big as ours, our planet was bound to exist somewhere and we just happen to be on it. Of course we find

ourselves existing on a planet suited for our existence, that's the only place we could find ourselves. No matter the improbability of something happening, once it happens it's a certainty."

And of course there are arguments for a multiverse...trillions of universes out there so of course at some point, the one we find ourselves in comes to be.

Well, you've still got to answer the question of origins for this multiverse. And on top of that, there is not a shred of evidence that a multiverse exists. It could exist. But there is no reason to think it does other than science fiction movies and DC comics. And even more, the odds of a planet like ours existing is so ridiculously low you have to defy common sense to think it just happened.

Alvin Plantinga, Philosophy Professor, gives this illustration to his class:

Imagine you're in Texas and you're playing poker with a bunch of cowboys. You're dealing. Four times in a row you deal yourself four aces. Well, that fourth time they start to get their pistols out. You say, "Wait! There are trillions of universes, so the chances are in one of them all of these things happen by accident. We just happen to be in the one where I always deal myself four aces." They're going to shoot you. The reason they're going to shoot you is that even though it is possible that all of that happened by accident, the one-in-a-trillion possibility of it happening by accident is possible, but it's unreasonable to assume that. It's much more reasonable to assume it was deliberate. Therefore, it's possible that human life and matter came about by accident here, but isn't it unreasonable to base your life on the idea that the one in a trillion chance happened?

That's the teleological argument.

Our world has a design.

Anything with a design has a designer.

Therefore, the world has a designer.

So those are two of the arguments for the existence of God that come from observable creation, as Paul says in Romans. There are a good many more and we've got those resources available for you on the website. Things like the regularity of nature, ontological argument, human consciousness. I even tried to read one about math. It referenced Nobel Prize speech called "the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences" and I didn't understand a single word of it. I mean, not a single word.

There are some good arguments to consider and for some people, these sort of external arguments are persuasive. You know they are powerful because all the new atheist books deal with them. They wouldn't deal with an argument unless they felt it had some force. Maybe someone in the room right now is thinking, "You know, I am an atheist but I didn't know about Jupiter. Now that you told me about Jupiter, there must be a God!"

For others of us though, these sorts of arguments might not really move the needle. We don't find them persuasive. And what's interesting is that this sort of argument is not actually the main point Paul is making in Romans 1. He says, the knowledge of God is made known through creation, but that's not his main point.

When you ask Paul, "How do you know God exists? His answer is that you can know rationally by looking at the world, but you already know intuitively. You already know that God exists. Everyone does.

look at verse 18.

Romans 1:18-21

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. **19** For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. **21** For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God

Then later on verse 24 it says, "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie."

Over and over here it says all human beings already know there's a God, even if we won't admit it to ourselves. That's Paul's point. He says it is absolutely basic to the human condition that everybody knows deep down that there is a God. That we know this intuitively. The vast majority of people in the world believe in God. They always have, and they haven't done it by working through the cosmological and teleological arguments. Why? Because everybody already knows there's a God intuitively. This is what my pastor in college meant when he said, "How do you know that you exist?" You don't know that you exist through a series of arguments. You know you exist intuitively. This is how everyone knows God exists.

The problem is, we don't want to know. So we suppress the truth that we know. This reality is too unsettling and too traumatic, so we suppress it. We know, but we don't want to know, so we don't know. You wanted to talk about philosophy, but Paul is taking you to therapy. He's talking about repressed knowledge.

His assertion is that everyone knows God is there, eternal, powerful creator, and we know what that means. It means we owe him everything.

But because of our sin, human beings do not want to admit we are completely dependent on God for everything, that he keeps us alive every second, that everything we have belongs to him. We shouldn't make a move without asking him. We hate the fact that means we lose all control. We hate the knowledge of the true God, so we hold it down and repress it. That's what every single one of us has done.

Now, there are multiple ways to suppress the knowledge of the true God because it's so traumatic. You can say "There is no God" and you get to keep control of your life.

Or you can just come up with a view of God that lets you live any way you want. You could say, "I believe in a god of love who just loves everyone and accepts everyone." That's just as good as not believing in God...because you keep control.

In both cases, you're suppressing the truth.

Very few people know that they are doing that. Most of us fancy ourselves as neutral, bi partisan, dispassionate, unbiased.

We might like to think we're objectively weighing the evidence, but we are most certainly not. Some happen to know it, like philosopher Thomas Nagel at NYU. Here's what he says in his book *The Last Word*. He says,

I want atheism to be true. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally hope that I'm right in my belief; it's that I hope there is no God. I don't want there to be a God. I don't want the universe to be like that. I'm curious whether there's anyone who could genuinely be indifferent as to whether there is a God.

--**Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word***

What he says is, "I don't want there to be a God, because then I have to change the way in which I live, and I can't imagine anybody is actually objective about this subject." That's exactly what Paul is saying. Of course nobody is objective. We know God is there, but because we also know what that means, we suppress that knowledge.

Let me quickly give you a couple of arguments to defend the claim that everyone already knows there is a God. Not just an argument for God's existence but an argument that we all already know he exists.

III. Moral argument - "an argument from ought"

- 1) There is a universal moral law.
- 2) Therefore, there is a moral law-giver.

This one isn't as much about premises and conclusions because it's grounded in what you already know.

Is there anything happening in the world that you think is wrong? If you say "yes", which everyone does, then you know there's a God. There is more that could be unpacked, but the argument is really that simple.

We all have moral feelings, that there are things that would be wrong for me to do. And secular Americans love to say they think others should decide what is right and wrong for themselves. Yet when we look at some evil, like say, human trafficking, we say it isn't simply that it would be wrong for me to do that, but that it is wrong for anyone to do it. It's a transcendent standard that applies to everyone, everywhere. Well, the only way to have a transcendent standard is to have a transcendent standard giver who has written his law on our hearts, as Romans 2 says.

We insist that people care about justice, we insist that people not trample on the poor, insist that people believe in human rights. But if there is no God, there's absolutely no basis for talking like that. If there's no God, we're just animated pieces of meat. We're not even here for any purpose. There is not a "right way to live." We're here by accident. Anybody who says, "This is unjust and this is just," that's your opinion.

If you say, "I believe that all humans are equal in dignity and worth, therefore all have individual rights that must not be violated." I would say that I agree. I agree because we are made in God's

image. But if there is no God then how can you possibly argue that humans are equal in any way really?

You could say that it's self evident but to most people in the world it actually isn't self evident. This idea didn't come from nature. In nature the strong dominate the weak as a rule. And we don't consider it a violation. Only when people do it is a violation.

If there is no God, then you have no basis for calling human trafficking evil. You can say it's distasteful to you. But to call it evil you need a standard outside of nature, that applies to everyone whether they agree or not.

And here is the power of the argument: you know human trafficking is evil. You know it. You know people should stop doing it.

The reason why? What we're all doing is living as if there is a God because we know there's a God, but we suppress the truth. We can't live as if there is no God, because deep down we know he's there.

C.S. Lewis is an interesting example. He was an atheist. He was an atheist not just because he thought Christianity was silly, but because he thought the world was cruel. He lost his mother at an early age when he was young:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust, but how had I gotten this idea of just and unjust? What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? Of course, I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own, but if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too, for the whole argument depended on saying the world really was unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my fancies. Consequently, atheism turns out to be too simple.

--C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

He says even in denying God's existence I couldn't force myself to operate as though God wasn't there, deep down I knew, and that's why I had a standard for morality.

We'll end with another inward one:

IV. Existential - an argument from desire

- 1) We have a natural desire for the transcendent.
- 2) Natural desires have a corresponding object.
- 3) Therefore, something transcendent exists.

I'll admit that this one is by far the most subjective of the four I'm bringing up today. The argument is simply this: inside each of us is longing for something eternal and infinite. There are things that seem to be implanted in our hearts that tell us that we are more than just accidental biology and that we were created for something infinite.

CS Lewis comes in handy again here in his book *Mere Christianity*:

A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire

which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

-C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Hunger doesn't mean a particular meal exists and will be brought to you. But the innate appetite we call hunger corresponds to the existence of food. Innate desires correspond to real objects that can satisfy them. Sexual desire, sex exists. Tiredness and sleep exists. Relational desires, friendship exists. So if we find in ourselves a longing for something eternal, infinite, is that not potential evidence of the existence of something eternal and infinite that corresponds? We have a longing for joy, love, beauty that no amount of quality of food, sex, friendship, or success can satisfy. We know these things matter and we long for them. We want something that nothing in this world seems able to fulfill. Something that all these wonderful things we enjoy can only hint at.

This one starts to pull together all that we've talked about today. This explains what you feel when you look deep into the stars or when you look deep into the eyes of someone you love. You sense a hint at something bigger, more. It explains what you feel when you marvel over the intricacy of the things on Earth that are particularly amazing to you, and what you sense when you hear transcendent music. It explains what you feel when a loved one dies, and why you revolt against injustice in your life and in the world.

If there is no God, then love is meaningless. Beauty is just chemicals in your brain. Right and wrong are just preferences and calls for justice are just opinions. It doesn't actually matter how we treat each other because one day the sun will explode and no one will ever know any of this even happened.

Is love meaningless, right and wrong are just preference and calls for justice just opinion? Beauty just chemicals in your brain? If there is no God then the answer must be yes.

But we don't live this way. We can't live this way. We know that beauty and love mean something. In their presence we can no more deny that they mean something than we can deny the nose on our face. NO matter our beliefs about the randomness and meaninglessness of life, standing in front of beauty and love, we know better. We know there is right and wrong.

If a premise leads you to a conclusion that you know is not true, then why not reconsider the premise?

If God exists, then the Big Bang is not mysterious, nor is the fine tuning of the universe. In fact, they are what we would expect to find. If God exists, then our intuitions about the meaningfulness of love and beauty are to be expected. We long for something eternal and infinite because that is what we were created for.

Which worldview is the best explanation of the evidence?

So Paul says...

Romans 1:25

because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie

We all have made a horrible trade. The truth about God, for a lie. Reality for unreality. Truth for a lie.

We suppress this knowledge because we think it's too costly. We think we lose too much control. It's unsettling to acknowledge your utter dependency, your smallness. Reality is hard to live in sometimes. We have doubts whether God is powerful enough or loving enough to trust.

The solution is to realize that this God is not just divine power, eternally omnipotent. He's also the lover of your soul. He's the eternal God who not only put Jupiter in just the right place so you won't die, but also wrapped himself in humanity to pursue you and me who were consciously or unconsciously denying what we know is true about him. He's the god not just of wrath, but the god who diverts that wrath away and into his own Son. He is omnipotent power and eternal, unfailing love.

Through Jesus, God invites us to trade back. He invites us to trade our sin for His grace, our unreality for Reality. He shows up on our doorstep and invites us to un-suppress the truth we have been suppressing. You gain far more than you lose by coming to him. By surrendering to him. By bowing to him. By giving control to him and trusting him. You do lose control, but you get God. And both of those are the best thing possible for you.