

*You Pick The Sermon: What Do I Do With My Fears And Doubts?*

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*Isaiah 35:3-10; Luke 24:36-49; 1 John 4:12-18*

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from 1 John 4:12-18. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word. “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

Last Saturday night, a young man came into the church looking for the lavatory. I was struck by the back of his T-shirt, which read, “Science is true even if you don’t believe it.” This is the new mantra of the scientific atheist movement led by enthusiasts like Bill Nye and Neil deGrasse Tyson. It’s a complete turnaround of the Christian point of view. The psalms preach, “The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."” I heard it said as a kid, “God exists even if you don’t believe in Him.” Now our culture has done a 180 away from God, and a catchphrase for the existence of God is now browbeating us about science. We live in bizarre times.

It leads us to this week’s You Pick The Sermon question: what do I do with my doubts and fears? We are confronted regularly with demands to abandon our faith. We hear our beliefs are we’re old-fashioned at best, and possibly bigoted and hateful. We fear believing something untrue. How do we know God is real? Why do we not see miracles like those in Scripture? While we all have different fears and doubts about faith, these are the ones brought up by the asker of the question, so we’ll focus on them. These issues challenge my faith as well. This is a good learning conversation for me too.

The first question that we’re going to handle is this: how do we know that the God of Scripture is real – or at least that the argument for Him makes the most sense? I was asked to explain it without Scripture, because using Scripture to say that God is real is self-referential. So we’re going to look at our other options from a logical point of view, hopefully without bias.

I have never seriously considered any other religion besides Christianity because it stands apart in one aspect: grace. Author C.S. Lewis called it the “easiest” difference to spot, and he’s right. There are plenty of similarities between religions. The world had myths of gods dying and coming back to life before Jesus. Nobody believed Christianity was true because it was first to introduce every concept it does. No, Christianity stands out because of grace.

Every other religion has a path to God, if it has a concept of God at all. You follow the rules, you do certain things that make you a good person, and you'll be OK in whatever afterlife exists. Those rules are different from religion to religion, but they are all based in a cultural understanding of being good. It's impossible to follow them all; Islam says killing unbelievers is a good act of faith. In Buddhism, it's impossible to be good and raise animals for food. You've got to choose which one is right and hope you guessed right.

Christianity is the only faith system that not only tells us what is right and wrong by God's standard, it tells us that we have failed to keep it, and it provides a means of forgiveness and grace so we can be restored. There is a path in Christianity, but it's a path you walk with God once He's introduced Himself to you, not one you have to walk in order to meet Him. In Christianity, the story is not about what we do to reach God but what Jesus Christ has already done to save us.

Christianity makes sense of the world in ways other religions don't. Scripture doesn't contain fictional superheroes but very flawed individuals who love God. And when it comes to God Himself, He is complex, not easily understood, yet He wants to be in relationship with us. Christianity is the only religion that makes sense for the whole world and not just one culture or people group.

That really leaves atheism, not other world religions, as the greatest threat to faith. Atheism usually touts science and the scientific method as the reason for their unbelief. The average atheist claims that science disproves Scripture. They take a literal view of poetic passages of Scripture and say things can't happen like that; they look at miracles and scoff because "everyone knows" things don't work that way.

But let's be clear. Science as a pursuit of faith is a wonderful thing. The Christian church has been at the forefront of scientific discovery. Hospitals around the world were started by Christians who wanted to see people be healed and come to belief in the master healer. While the church has sometimes been leery of scientific pursuits, it has also financed those same pursuits! There is no reason to be afraid of it.

And that's because pure science is about facts. Those facts help us to understand how God set up this universe. They lead us to worship His incredible nature, how He fashioned all that exists, with its trillions of spinning stars and planets, in such a way that we are able to live on this rock. The more we learn about medicine, the more we should be amazed at the complexity of how God created us and how little we understand of our own biology. It should make us bow before Him in wonder and awe.

But science as a religion is something else entirely, and that's what we're being sold today. Maybe you learned about the scientific method in high school like I did. It goes like this: we make observations about the world around us. Then we hypothesize why those things are the way they are. We test our theories, gathering data we can measure. We see if the data fits our hypothesis. Then we adapt our hypothesis and test our data in a continuing circle.

That's a good process, but it has problems. The problem with science is that it relies on faith just as much as everything else. Even if we measure data perfectly, we always interpret it through a lens. Nobody comes at anything with an entirely objective point of view. Creating a theory or a hypothesis requires a point of view. And we hate to be wrong. Even the most moral person has reasons to want Christianity to be true and reasons to want atheism to be true. We can manipulate data to support our point of view.

And we never have the whole picture. Consider gravity. We've always lived with it. Newton observed the data and worked out the formula for gravity and how it works not just here on earth but everywhere in the universe. However, his formula was slightly wrong. It wasn't until two hundred and fifty years later that Einstein proposed relativity and those inaccuracies were explained. Even now, over a hundred years after Einstein explained his theory of relativity, it is incomplete – it still doesn't explain the fullness of how gravity works in the universe. Who knows if we will ever have the full picture! And who knows what we are getting wrong because we've observed so little of history taking place from a scientific point of view!

Sadly, just as there is money to be made from false teachers exploiting Christianity, there is money to be made from the pursuit of atheistic science. Researchers are under pressure to produce results and to “publish or perish.” That's why we see falsified data and bad premises regularly in scientific circles – there's money to be made and viewpoints to prop up. Scientific data is supposed to be observable, measurable, and repeatable – but it takes time and money to verify someone else's results. Just recently, a set of bones said to prove evolution over millions of years was carbon-dated by another team that dates them to less than 6,000 years old – less time than we've been around according to the most literal reading of the Bible possible.

But there are other problems with atheistic science as a faith. It cannot explain our appreciation of a sunset or anything else of beauty; it cannot explain self-sacrifice or mercy or grace. Atheistic science says we are a great big accident. And atheistic science cannot call anything evil. If there is no foundation for morality, science cannot object to a Hitler or a Stalin or a Pol Pot; they are merely carrying out their biological imperatives.

Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, was a eugenicist who believed in perfecting the human race by weeding out the weak and undesirable, particularly those with African backgrounds. There's nothing wrong with that if atheistic science is all we've got. And evolution cannot explain why we would feel that calling someone inferior because of the color of their skin is morally repugnant. It cannot explain morality at all.

Science is a wonderful way to explore God's creation and to understand more and more of it. It compliments faith in a great God who made us. As a Christian, I love all that scientific pursuits have achieved so that we can appreciate more of God's world. It makes no sense to follow it down the atheistic path. We don't need to fear that God is not there because other people do not believe He exists. And calling us names for what we believe might make us feel badly, but it doesn't mean we are those things. Because of the Lord's Table, the early Christians were called cannibals; because they wouldn't bow to Caesar, they were called atheists. Know that your God and your faith are stronger than the world's latest fads and insults.

If that leaves us with Christianity, there are still doubts and fears to face. A chief one is this: why aren't miracles evident to us like they were in the Bible? Why don't *we* get to see the same kind of evidence that those in the Bible say they saw? Were they just making it up? We are convinced that if God exists at all or is still at work, we should be able to see biblical-style miracles. Science might not be able to explain them – a one-time event can't be measured or repeated – but at least science would have to grapple with them.

But what I find fascinating and believable about the miraculous in Scripture isn't that God does miracles, or their rarity – they don't occur often at all. It's the human reaction to miracles. In Scripture, miracles are not a cure-all that convinces people of God's existence or causes them to worship Him if they do believe. In fact, miracles create huge crises.

Think about the exodus from Egypt. God sends ten plagues against Egypt. Pharaoh is so stubborn that until his own firstborn lies dead, he refuses to let the Israelites go! Even then, even as incontrovertible proof of God's existence and power are before them, the Egyptians don't bow down to God in mass. Almost none convert and believe...and that's true of unbelievers throughout the Old Testament.

Then the Israelites, God's chosen people, walk through a sea; a pillar of fire leads them by night and a pillar of cloud by day; food rains from the sky. And they complain; they want another God! While Moses talks with God for forty days, they make a golden calf to worship! They are in the hands of the true God and they don't like it! They want Him to go away!

When we get to Jesus, His miracles create huge controversies. Jesus heals left and right, casts out demons, multiplies loaves and fish by the thousands, and the unbelieving are never satisfied. The religious leaders are mad that He won't do miracles exclusively for them. He heals like no one has ever healed and they are angry because He heals on the Sabbath.

Crowds follow Him around after He feeds them, but when Jesus says more food isn't coming, they leave in droves. Sometimes, people are so intimidated by Jesus' miracles that they ask Him to leave their town. And when Jesus dies and comes back from the grave, His own disciples can't believe it because they know people don't come back from the dead. Miracles are not the cure to our faith problem.

And yet, God still uses miracles. Muslims have dreams about Isa, the Arabic name for Jesus, even though they've never met a Christian. Missionaries tell about how God works in stunning, miraculous ways so that people who have never heard the gospel believe the good news. And we continue to see miracles all around us. That my family survived a winter car wreck in 2011 was, according to the paramedics that picked us up, a miracle. Many of us have experienced the grace of God in very real, tangible ways that we can't explain otherwise.

So what's really the issue? It's that in the face of hardship and pain, it hurts to be a Christian, and faith by the Bible's definition is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. We believe in the God who we cannot scientifically prove exists. We must trust that God is faithful, as Scripture promises us.

As God told us tonight through the prophet Isaiah, “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.” They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

If you struggle with faith because you don’t have enough tangible evidence, ask for God to show Himself to you. He is everywhere; there is nothing He doesn’t touch. He is real; I am fully confident of that. In Jeremiah, God says, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” God says this to His people, and it’s not an “if you seek me” but “when.” God fully expects that His people will find Him, and not by proving ourselves worthy or following some noble path, but by seeking Him wholeheartedly.

Here’s the rub: we dodge finding out if God is real because we are afraid. Because God as He presents Himself in Scripture is powerful, all-knowing, and all-seeing, and He judges our hearts and minds. We would prefer a god who stays at a distance, who judges nothing, who has nothing to say about what we do. We are afraid that God might want our lives to change or to send us on a difficult journey that we don’t want to take.

Many people come to church every so often thinking that He might be just pleased enough with us to leave us alone and be merciful to us when we die. We fear a story like that of the rich young ruler, who followed God from his youth but went away sad when Jesus confronted him to give away his wealth in order to follow. We’d like enough of God to be comfortable, not uncomfortable. We would rather live with fears that He doesn’t exist than fears that we might be called to a harder life.

But God loves you! Jesus loved you enough to die for you! Would God do anything against you if He loves you that much? As we heard tonight, “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Jesus’] name to all nations.” He wants us to be forgiven and to know Him personally! Everything God does, He does for the benefit of those who are called according to His purpose, according to Romans 8:28. Some things He asks us to do are hard. But they grow and shape us, make our faith stronger, and develop us into the people He created us to be.

Seek God with your whole heart, and you will find Him. Ask Him to work powerfully in your life, and He will. He’s done it in my life; He will do it in yours. Call upon Him in prayer and ask Him to fulfill your needs. He will be faithful. Don’t pray for little and expect less. Don’t pray for things outside of God’s will and take it as a sign that God doesn’t exist when He keeps you away from things that won’t help you to grow spiritually. Instead, pray for God’s will to be done and that you might be open to His will. And He will do it! When you doubt, turn back to the story of Jesus, all He is and all He did, and you will find the truth there.

If God had not moved powerfully in my life, I wouldn’t have had the adventure of living in Russia, being married to my wonderful wife, or even standing here talking to you tonight! And yes, even when God is working powerfully in your life, doubts can still creep in. But those doubts can’t stand when you take into account all that God has done.

Friends, Scripture has a continuing refrain: “don’t be afraid.” Instead, come before God as you are. Be made whole. Be healed. Give your heart, mind, and life to Jesus. And the adventure to come will be beyond anything you can imagine, and the peace that passes understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Approach the throne of grace in confidence – God is here, God is near, and He wants you to know His love for you.