

## BELIEVING IN GOD

Have you ever tried to make conversation with a total stranger, say in a barber shop or in an airplane? What do people talk about in such situations? Usually things like the weather, the Dodgers' chances of winning the pennant, or the soaring cost of practically everything. Can you picture yourself talking about God in a situation like this? Probably not. But why? Well, for one thing, what people think about God is very personal. It's a part of your life that you just don't share with everybody. In fact, it's so personal that you may not feel comfortable sharing it with anybody.

This doesn't mean that it's not important, of course: Actually, it's hard to think of anything that's more important than whether or not there is a God. But it's the kind of question that puts a spotlight on the very center of your life and reveals the kind of person you really, truly are.

Sooner or later, however, we all have to answer such questions. So suppose that someone you knew and liked asked you what you thought about God. Which of the following answers would you give?

- 1) "I know there's a God, and I think He's wonderful."
- 2) "I believe there's a God, but I don't know much about Him."
- 3) "I don't think anybody knows for sure whether God exists or not."
- 4) "I'm absolutely convinced there is no God."

If your answer is number 1, then you may not need to read an article like this, and if it's number 4, then you've probably stopped reading already. But if your answer is number 2 or number 3, somewhere between "maybe" and "probably," then this article is for you. It's designed to help you make up your mind about God.

In order to answer the question "Does God exist?" we need to have some idea of what it is we're talking about. What do people have in mind when they use the word "God"?

The Bible speaks of God in its very first sentence: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). In other words, God brought the world into existence. He is the ultimate origin of everything.

The idea that God is Creator lies behind everything else the Bible says about God. As the Source of all life, God is Himself immortal, or incapable of death, and He is also supremely powerful and intelligent.

In addition to His power, the Bible also describes His feelings about the world He created. The most important of these is love--love so enormous and intense and human beings can only faintly imagine what it means. This is the characteristic mentioned in the most familiar verse in the Bible,

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

When people speak of God, then, they have in mind the personal being who is the ultimate cause of everything, and who is perfect in power and love.

When we think about the special kind of being God is, it isn't hard to understand why some people find it difficult to believe in Him. For one thing, we can't examine God or determine His existence by the same methods we use for other things. We can't see Him, even with telescopes and microscopes, or touch Him, or hear Him, nor does He have an address or phone number like other persons we know.

People also doubt God's existence because they think we no longer need Him to account for things. As a small child you may have thought Santa Claus brought you presents on Christmas Eve. Now, of course, you know that it was your parents all along. Similarly, science now explains a lot of things people used to think God was responsible for, like the movement of the stars, the growth of crops, or getting well from a disease.

Another reason people find it hard to believe in God is the evil and suffering they see in the world. If God is all-powerful, they reason, He would be able to prevent such things, and if He is indeed loving, He would want to prevent them. But still, they exist. So the God of the Bible, who is supposed to be both powerful and loving, must not be real.

If you sometimes doubt the reality of God, is it for one of the reasons just mentioned? Is it because sciences like chemistry and physics can't describe God? Or because we don't need God to explain certain things? Or, perhaps, because there is so much suffering in the world?

Or, if you have trouble believing in God, is it for a more personal reason, like finding that some supposedly religious people were just put-ons, or trying to talk to God but not getting an answer, or going through a terrible experience like losing someone you loved?

Whatever makes it hard for you to believe in God, there are two things you should keep in mind. First, the Bible knows that believing in God isn't easy. It's true that the writers of the Bible all assumed that God existed, but they didn't assume that trusting in God would always be easy for people. In fact, some of God's closest followers found it hard to trust Him at times. Even Jesus cried out at one point in His life, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" So you shouldn't feel that you are all alone if you find it hard to believe in God.

The second thing to remember is that the Bible gives us reasons for believing in God. It doesn't ask us to take a leap in the dark. It provides evidence that appeals to the minds of careful, thinking people.

One kind of evidence the Bible offers for God's existence is the order and beauty around us. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," David wrote, "and the firmament proclaims His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Centuries later the apostle Paul expressed essentially the same idea: "Ever since the creation of the world, His invisible nature, namely His eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things He had made" (Romans 1:20).

Just look at your hand, for example. You can turn it one way or another, and open and close it at will. Isn't it marvelous the way the thumb and finger opposed each other so you can grasp a tennis racket or write a letter? And with practice, your hands can play a guitar, weave a rug, or carve a statute. Or look at the sky on a clear night. Notice the countless stars and think about the immense distances between them. Many people find it harder to imagine that all this beauty just happened than to believe that someone who cared designed and created it.

When you think about it, even the simple fact that something exists is evidence that God is real. Everything you see in the world around you depends on something else for its existence. Nothing explains itself. But what about the universe as a whole? Did it just happen like some sort of cosmic accident? Or does it, too, have a cause? If it does, this cause must be a lot like the God of the Bible, for who or what could create a world except an infinitely intelligent and powerful being.

Another reason for believing in God is the way human beings behave. The apostle Paul once preached to the citizens of Athens, the most sophisticated audience of the world in his day. This is how his speech began: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an Unknown God.' What, therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23).

Paul's remarks remind us that human beings are naturally religious. We see this in the many religions in the world, but we can also see it in the fact that everybody worships something. It may not be God. It may even be a football team, or rock music, or food. But everybody worships something, including you. There is something in your life that you take very seriously. You are willing to make sacrifices for it, and you get upset if anyone criticizes or threatens it.

Why are we this way, compelled to devote ourselves to something? According to the Bible, because God created us to experience Him, to appreciate Him and enjoy Him as our greatest Friend.

Is what you care about most, what you worship, something other than God? If it is, do you really think that it deserves the importance you attach to it? According to the Bible, only God is great and good enough to deserve your complete devotion.

If we look at human history rather than nature, we find a different reason for believing in God. According to the Bible, God acts in unusual ways from time to time. He does so in order to make people aware of His existence, and to reveal the kind of person He really is.

We see the most important of these divine actions in the life of Jesus, who lived nearly two thousand years ago. Nearly everybody remembers some of the things Jesus said during His life, but even more remarkable are the things Jesus did. And the most remarkable thing of all was the way He treated other people--with love and respect. He never insulted anyone, He never took advantage of anyone, He never sought revenge. Even when He was being put to death for crimes He had never committed, He prayed for those who were killing Him.

How can we explain such behavior? It can't be due just to a good background, or a careful education, or any other natural explanation. It can only be the result of the greatest power in the universe. This is why many people regard Jesus' life as the most compelling evidence of all that God is real.

With all the evidence before you, you may still be unconvinced that God is real. So, it is important to remember the kind of person that God is. He invites you to believe in Him, but He will never force you. That is why all the evidence in the world will never make an air-tight case for God's existence. He wouldn't want it to, because God isn't interested in beating people over the head with His power. He doesn't want your loyalty if you're going to give it reluctantly or grudgingly. He wants to be your friend, not just your master. And that's why He always gives you room to doubt. But the evidence is there--not enough to build an air-tight case, but enough to make a reasonable decision, and it supports the view that God is real.

In making up your mind about God you need to remember one more thing: the consequences of your choice. A French thinker named Pascal once proposed a famous wager on God's existence. If you bet that God exists, he argued, and He doesn't, then you lose nothing. But if you bet that He doesn't exist, and He does, then you lose everything.

Deciding whether or not God exists isn't a gamble, as Pascal may seem to say. But the consequences of the choice are enormously important. In fact, it's the most important decision of your life. Think carefully about the reasons for and against believing in God. Then ask yourself two questions: "Which option makes more sense?" and "Which is worth staking your life on?"