

Seeds of Doubt Is God Real? (November 3, 2013)



Over the years I have had many people from inside our church and from other churches share with me the fact that they had some doubts about the faith.

I think of a young man who grew up in church – but after going to university and hearing about evolution and what science says – now had doubts about the reality of God and heaven and hell.

A young couple who lost a child in absolutely tragic circumstances – who now struggle to see God as good.

Others who have questions about the reliability of Scripture, the plan of God, election – and other difficult questions.

Some are reluctant to share the fact they have doubts because they are worried that others might look down on them. Many think Christians should never struggle with doubt.

I have even met some who believe that doubt is a sign you aren't saved.

Tonight, I want to state that it is very normal for Christians to go through times when they doubt.

Many of the heroes of the faith struggled with doubts.

Abraham had doubts about whether God's plan of salvation would come to pass.

Think of the prophet's – Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Isaiah – they had times of doubt – sometimes debilitating doubt.

The Psalmists often express their doubts and questions in very real terms. In Psalm 73 Asaph struggled with the fact the wicked often lived very good lives – so much so he says his feet almost stumbled and his steps almost slipped.

Consider John the Baptist – after testifying so strongly that Jesus is the Messiah – He sends word – are you the One? I know I told the world You are the Messiah – but are You?

Or Thomas – unless I see and feel – I won't believe Jesus rose from the dead.

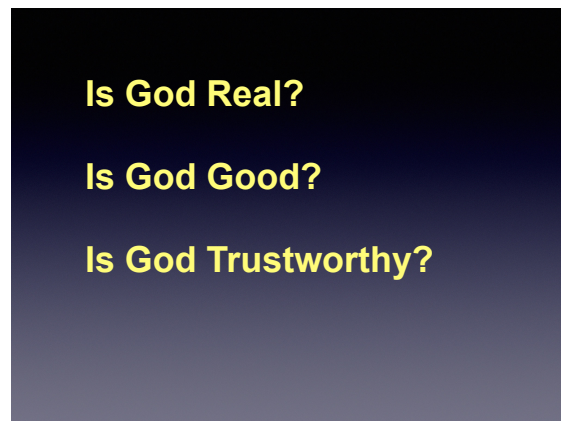
Look through church history at the men and women who had seasons of doubt.

Calvin, Luther, Edwards, Spurgeon.

Men like David Brainerd struggled through seasons of absolute doubt and despair.

We are meant to walk by faith. But often doubt elbows its way in.

Tonight and over the next two weeks – I want to look at three of the big doubts.



Is God Real?

Is God Good?

Is God Trustworthy?

The other big doubt – Is God mine? – has to do with our assurance of salvation. It is often related to sin. If I sin – can I be saved?

Dave and I dealt with this in a series last year on assurance of salvation so I won't look at this.

Tonight I want to begin with the question – Is God Real?

You might think this is a strange topic to address in a sermon – Christians know God exists. But here is the reality – it is a rare Christian who has never experienced those creeping seeds of doubt – does God actually exist?

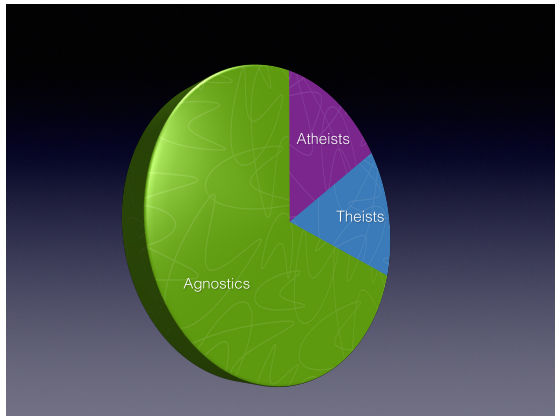
We are struggling a bit spiritually and we find that something whispers to us – is it just that I want to believe in God and heaven? Is it because my parents believed in God? And a sneaking doubt appears that asks – perhaps the atheists might be right – we are the product of chance – we are here because of evolution not divine fiat.

And so it is good to have somewhere to go to remind ourselves of why we believe in God.

100 years ago – the vast majority of Australians believed in God – in some form or another.

50 years ago – still the majority of Australians would have believed in a God of sorts.

Today – I want to suggest that there are two minorities and a great majority.



There are the convinced atheists. They are sure that there is no God – no supernatural deity – nothing to explain this world and our existence apart from the laws of science and chance.

Then there are the convinced theists. Those who live a life of faith knowing that there is a God – Christians, Jews, Muslims and others.

But it seems to me that the majority in Australia today are agnostics. Science says there is no God – but then they look at a sunrise or a newborn child and something inside them says – this isn't random chance. Many want to believe there is more to this world.

Yesterday I was at Southbank. I could not believe the number of people lining up for tarot readings, palm reading and other spiritual experiences. People feel there is more than science can explain.

And they are torn – they just don't know – they are agnostic – which means they aren't sure if there is a God or supernatural power – and if there is which is the true God.

But these categories are somewhat fluid. Many of us were convinced atheists or agnostics who now are theists.

And every one of us knows Christians who now say – there is no God.

Doubt erased faith.

It might be doubts caused by science or a disaster in their lives or sin.

As well, many of us love the Lord, we love Jesus – but from time to time doubts arise.

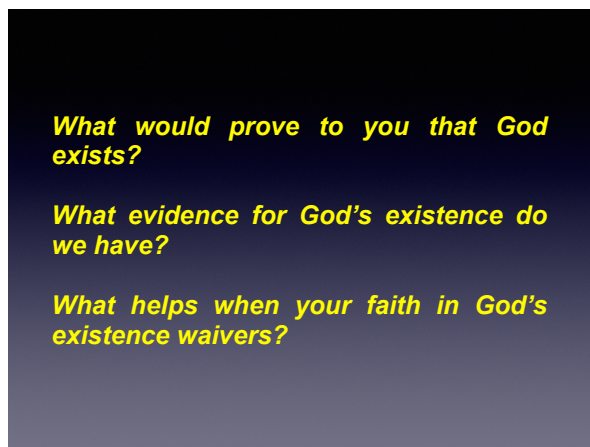
And in different countries the level of faith in God varies.

This slide reflects belief in God throughout Europe in 2005.

Notice it varies from almost none who believe to almost all who believe.

So tonight – I want to address two groups – those who don't believe in a God – Atheists and Agnostics – and those do have faith – theists – but your faith struggles from time to time.

I want to address three questions.



What would prove to you that God exists?

What evidence for God's existence do we have?

What helps when your faith in God's existence waivers?

It is fairly obvious that each of these deserves its own sermon or several sermons – so I will have to be really brief.

First of all – I want to ask you – *what would prove to you that God exists?*

Almost thirty years ago, a young man was witnessing to me. I pulled out the standard response – I'll believe when you can prove to me that God exists.

He responded – OK – so what would prove to you that God exists?

I remember my response – that is a trick question – if God exists it is up to Him to prove Himself.

But he responded again – seriously – is there anything could God possibly do that could prove to you that He exists?

Good question. I have asked a lot of people this question.

Most are like I was – they have never thought about it.

When they do think about it they usually say something like – well I think I would believe if God appeared before me – or if God did a miracle for me. Then I think I would believe.

Do you know what is amazing about these responses? – God did these very things – many times – and it did not lead to faith.

God appeared to men in the form of a man – He performed the most astonishing miracles – and they did not believe – in fact they crucified Him for coming as God.

Read the New Testament.

Think about John 5 and 6.

In John 5 – Jesus heals a man who had been an invalid for 38 years.

The leaders of the Jews saw this incredible miracle – did they believe? No they tried to kill him. So Jesus said – you don't believe My testimony that I am equal with God – but another also testifies – John the Baptist and you ignore him as well.

So Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee and there he performed another great miracle in front of 5000 pairs of eyes.

He took five loaves of barley bread and two small fish and fed that entire crowd. Pretty impressive.

Jesus then went back across the sea – but this time He walked on the water. Also impressive.

These are miracles performed in front of many people. But did it lead to faith. No John 6:66 tells us the people turned away.

The Bible tells us that we don't want to believe. We like to think we are our own God. We are captain of our own destiny.

If there is a God who demands we bend the knee before Him – that we hand over control of our life – then we will find any way we can to not believe.

In Romans 1:18–19:

What can be known about God is plain ... because God has shown it ... but because we are ungodly and unrighteousness ... we suppress the truth.

We don't want to believe – so no matter how much evidence is before us we will not believe.

The French atheist philosopher Voltaire is reported to have said, "If a miracle occurred in the market place of Paris and in the presence of two thousand men, I would rather disbelieve my own eyes than the two thousand."

I don't care how much evidence there is – there can't be a God – so I won't believe.

Examine the resurrection – there is so much evidence for this miracle – so many reports – it is astounding. But men refuse to believe.

Sceptics have looked at the New Testament and the reports of miracles – and dismissed all of the eyewitness reports – either men lied or they were deceived. Hypnosis, hallucinations, sleight of hand, mass persuasion, drugs – they have found every and any way to explain the miracles away.

Why? Because they don't want to believe.

I can remember my thoughts nearly thirty years ago – what would make me believe? What if God appeared to me and did a miracle – a great miracle – raised a dead person to life before me? Would that be enough?

I did not want to believe, so I can remember thinking that I would look for the trick. Was the person really dead? Was I hallucinating? Some way to say – this is not real.

Unbelief finds a way to deny reality.

The story is told about four friends – a Christian, two atheists and an agnostic.

Their get togethers often led to a series of arguments regarding the existence of God, and the three were always in accord against the one. As a Christian he would appeal to creation and the miracles of Scripture. They would appeal to Kant and Darwin and Freud.

One day, the odd one out, after the usual "3 to 1, majority rules" statement that signified that he had lost again, decided to appeal to a higher authority.

"Oh, God!" he cried. "I love your Word. I cannot bear to see it devalued in this way. I have never asked this before, but Lord would you please consider a sign to prove to these Your existence!"

It was a beautiful, sunny day. As soon as the Christian finished his prayer, a storm cloud moved across the sky above the four. It rumbled once and dissolved. "A sign from God! See, I'm right, I knew it!"

But the other three disagreed, pointing out that storm clouds are prone to form on hot days.

So the Christian prayed again: "Oh, God, it seems a bigger sign is needed to pierce their hard heads."

This time four storm clouds appeared, rushed toward each other to form one big cloud, and a bolt of lightning slammed into a tree on a nearby hill.

“I told you the Scriptures were right – there is a God!”

But the others insisted that while very unusual, it was possible that it could be explained by natural causes.

The Christian was getting ready to pray for a sign they could not possibly deny, but just as he was about to pray, the sky turned pitch black, the earth shook, a blinding light appeared and a deep, booming voice intoned, “THIS IS GOD. HE IS RIGHT. MY HEAVENS AND MY WORD DECLARE IT!”

The Christian put his hands on his hips, turned to the other three, and said, “How about that? Do we believe He exists now?”

There was a silence. Finally, one of the others spoke up, “Impressive, but I still say it’s still only 3 to 2.”

Unbelief is a hard egg to crack.

Here is the problem when you talk about ‘proving’ God exists. Certain branches of mathematics have proofs – but science doesn’t have the same kind of exact proofs. You cannot ‘prove’ a law or a theory or the existence of something in the same way that you prove certain mathematical equations.

All you can say is certain things seem to happen regularly under the same circumstances.

Philosophers and scientists will tell you that you can’t prove with mathematical certainty even things we take for granted.

Can I prove that Dave D’Amour exists?

Well, it depends on what you mean by prove. There is a lot of evidence that he exists. We can touch him, hear him, photograph him. People have met him and known him for decades. If needs be we can autopsy him, test his DNA and preserve him.

While this gives us good evidence that he exists – it is not certainty in the same way that mathematical proofs are.

I happen to believe that Dave exists – but there is an infinitesimal chance he doesn’t.

Something could be causing all of us to hallucinate about Dave D’Amour. We could all be part of some alien virtual reality in which none of us actually exist. Dave could be an advanced holographic projection from the future.

While the chances are incredibly strong that Dave D’Amour actually exists – it is not scientifically certain – it is just scientifically very, very likely.

But while some sliver of doubt exists – some people will take it.

There are plenty of people who believe none of us actually exist.

Similarly, there are many things you can't put in a test tube or a calculator and prove. I believe fervently that my wife loves me. Can I prove it? Not with mathematical certainty – but enough for me to know it.

What is my point? Since God is not an equation – we can't prove He exists or does not exist in the way some want proof. Miracles, appearances – they are evidence – but not proof.

In the realm of anything other than certain mathematical formulas – what we do is gather evidence and then we decide if we believe it is sufficient or not.

There has to be an element of faith. Sometimes large faith – sometimes small faith.

But my point is that ultimately – there has to be an element of faith. We live by faith in all areas of our lives.

We fly in planes and by faith believe they will stay in the air and get us to our destination.

We put faith in doctors to cut us open and heal us.

We sit on chairs and believe by faith they will hold us up.

Why? Because although we can't prove these things scientifically – there is plenty of evidence that we have good reason to put our faith in them.

But there is always a degree of faith.

Let me give you an analogy.

Some groups have been looking for a couple of centuries for evidence that Bigfoot exists.

The best they have are a few grainy pictures and some rather fake looking footprints – but does this prove or disprove Bigfoot?

No. All science can do is say that we have been looking for Bigfoot for a long time and never found one – and never found what most would call compelling or even good evidence.

But some find the evidence to be enough that they believe. There is a component of faith.

I tend to believe that in regard to Bigfoot – the evidence is not compelling. The amount of faith is too much.

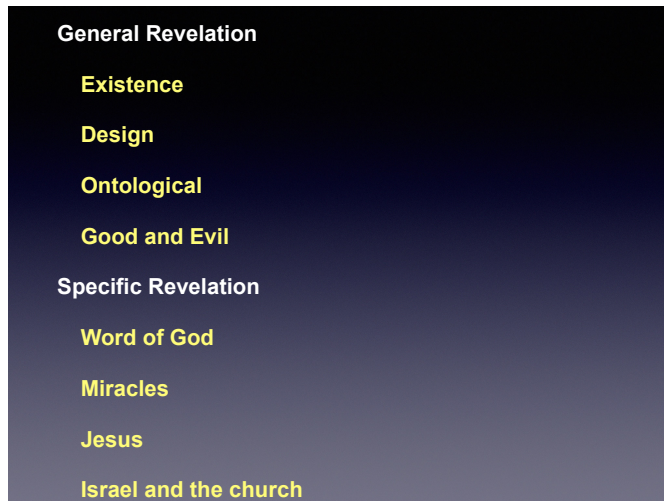
But, in terms of the evidence for God – I find it very compelling.

That moves us to the second question.

What evidence for God's existence do we have?

I have on my bookshelf literally dozens of books dealing with this.

Here are some of the main evidences discussed. Most of them have much fancier names.



General Revelation

Existence

The universe, including us exists. It is changing. Something had to bring it into existence. The uncaused cause is by definition God.

Design

One of the strongest arguments. The more we have discovered about the universe and our world – the more it has become clear that our universe seems to have been designed for us to exist.

The laws of physics seem perfectly designed to allow life.

The precise distance earth is from the sun. The ozone layer. Our slightly elliptical orbit. The size of our moon.

The universe is complex and designed.

And so are we. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. With all our advances in medicine and technology we barely understand how much of the human body works let alone duplicate it.

To think time and chance created us is too much for many.

Psalm 19 says the heavens declare the glory of God.

Someone made all of this. Someone made us. And by definition that someone is God.

Ontological

The ontological argument is one that has convinced many philosophers.

I think I must be not quite smart enough to grasp the fullness of this argument.

It is usually expressed as a logical argument:

God is the greatest conceivable being.
It is greater to exist than not to exist.
Therefore, God exists

If that rocks your world – great – but that one just doesn't do it for me.

Good and Evil

The fact that we know some things are good and evil cannot be explained in any other way than that these truths are embedded in us – our conscience by the Creator – God.

Specific Revelation

Word of God

If there is a God – by definition – we could not know Him or have a relationship with Him – unless He deigned to lower Himself to communicate with us.

We can't understand an eternal, omnipotent being who is Spirit.

But God has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

Miracles

If God is omnipotent – He can do anything – including events which run counter to the various laws He has created to give us a stable world to live in.

Miracles declare there is a God.

And history is replete with miracles – perhaps the greatest of these is the resurrection. Attested by many who saw the risen Christ. An event that changed the course of world history.

Jesus

Hebrews 1:1–2 says:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

John 1 says – the Word became flesh.

God chose to enter our world to tell us why He created us and to show us the way of salvation.

No serious historian denies the existence of Jesus of Nazareth.

The question you have to decide is whether you accept His claim to be God in human flesh – a claim backed up by miracles and the resurrection.

Israel and the church

There are no Philistines or Edomites or Jebusites – but there are Jews.

Despite persecution – destruction – exile – Israel exists today as a nation. That is a miracle.

The fact the church exists. Persecution, opposition, enemies – the fact the church has grown and spread is a miracle.

The fact men and women are continually saved from their idols of money, sex, self – is a miracle.

One way or another – there is plenty of evidence for God.

Each of us have to decide if it is enough. If it is compelling.

I want to suggest – this more than enough – but men just don't want to believe.

They find ways to answer this evidence without the need for God.

A few months back I showed a few excerpts of an episode of Catalyst called *Custom Universe ... fine tuned for us?*

Let me play those bits again. Listen to the evidence – and listen how brilliant scientists look for every way to get around the evidence simply because they don't want to believe God exists.

Basically, scientists know there is an enormous amount of evidence that the universe was designed for us.

The laws of physics are so perfectly designed to allow life. This show talked about – the strength of gravity. The balance of the Higgs Boson particle. The energy of dark matter – 122 decimal places of 0 then 138. Anything different than that immensely precise number and life could not exist.

It is so amazing – you would think physicists would see the hand of God. But no. They choose not to.

They do know that it is a statistical impossibility that everything just happened to turn out right in this universe.

So how do they explain it?

What does that mean?

If you postulate that there are an infinite number of universes that exist for eternity – and the big bang happened slightly differently in each one so they all have slightly different laws of physics – then in infinity one of them has to turn out right for life – and we just got lucky and live in that one.

That is an awful lot of faith.

Of course – since there is no evidence of infinite universes – other physicists don't like that idea.

Some future scientists travel back in time to set the laws of physics at the big bang.

And if you don't like putting faith in infinite universes or time travelling scientists then there is always this:

Aliens made the universe – or we are simply no more than virtual reality on some alien supercomputer.

Right now most scientists think the multiverse idea is the best way to explain the universe – however:

What is my point?

We have **no** evidence for multiverses – time travelling scientists – or universe building aliens. None.

It is an enormous leap of faith to hold to any of them. They do it because multiverses do not demand we bend the knee of allegiance.

But, here is the amazing point. We **do** have evidence for God.

Creation, the Bible, miracles, transformed lives.

It is not that there is not enough evidence for God – there is so much – it is just we don't want to believe it.

Science simply cannot explain where we came from and why we are.

But science has become a religion – but it has replaced God with multiverses, time travel and aliens.

The question is this – is the evidence for God greater than the evidence for something else?

And this is where the question of faith enters in. Since you cannot prove in the same way as a mathematical proof – you have to decide if the evidence is enough for you.

Open your eyes and look – the heavens declare the glory of God – the evidence is there.

But there is one final question I want to talk about.

What helps when your faith in God's existence waivers?

1 Corinthians 2:12–16 tells us this:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

We all have a degree of spiritual blindness, hardness of heart due to being fallen men and women.

It is the work of the Spirit of God to take away that blindness and let us see.

When I became a Christian – when God opened my blinded eyes to the truth – it became so clear – there is a God – the evidence was all there.

I remember thinking – wow – now I see – it will be so easy to show others the truth.

One of the first people I shared with was my mother. She came to Christ. I thought – this is great.

Then I went to several of my closest friends – basically they thought I had gone mad. God did not open those blinded eyes.

But I knew the truth.

However, what I found was that over the years – there were times when my faith waned a bit – when I was not as sure – and something happened that I never expected.

Doubts crept in.

Even doubts about God.

The gospel is not something we can test in the same way we test a mathematical equation or even a scientific theory.

The deity of Christ, salvation by faith, heaven – how do you test these? You can't put them in a test tube or work them out in a calculation.

Was evolution true? Did chance and billions of years make me not God?

Is the world just a cosmic accident? Was Jesus just a man? Is there really a heaven?

Should I just eat drink and be merry? Should I live for today not eternity?

I suspect most Christians have those days.

I have talked to many Christians about this – most have had seasons of doubt and struggle.

What do you do?

What I have found is that different things help restore faith in different Christians.

You need to find those things that are your spiritual anchor – your rock when the seeds of doubt arise.

When I have those days, there are many things that help restore my spiritual sanity.

Reading the Word – just reading it and I know there is no way the Bible is the words of mere men.

I have read parts of the Koran and Book of Mormon and other books – they don't cut it. They read like the words of men. The Bible – God becoming man – sacrificing Himself for sinners – dealing with sin – I read and I know it is true.

I go to the Word when I doubt. Usually the Psalms and the gospels.

Looking at the glory of God's creation. The stars, the ocean, the animals. Realising that this did not all create itself.

I think about how wonderfully and fearfully made we are.

I think about the alternative.

Evolution says that somehow fish knew they needed a different body and by natural selection their bodies changed. They developed legs and skin and lungs and moved from water to the land.

Then dinosaurs knew they needed a different body and by natural selection their bodies changed. They developed wings and hollow bones and feathers and moved from land to the skies.

I know many hold to this – personally I can't buy it. I just can't. I see the hand of God in creation. I look at a sunrise. I look at a whale. I look at the stars. I know God is true.

Another of the great ways that helps me know the truth of the gospel is to stop and think about the evidence concerning the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

I also think about my life – how my life changed 180 degrees – it was a supernatural change – I believe that.

I think about these things and my doubts subside.

Those are my touchstones in the swell of doubt. Maybe they are yours – but we all need them.

But they can only take us so far. Ultimately, the Christian life is one of faith. We walk by faith and not by sight.

And that is why testimonies are so powerful.

The Bible says that God created us to find our real meaning in Him. Our hearts find rest and true satisfaction only in Him.

I looked everywhere – but it was only in Jesus that I found meaning and life.

Jesus said – I am the way, the truth and the life.

Millions and millions have tasted and found this to be true.

Subjective – yes. But true none the less.

Psalm 34:8 says – Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Brothers and sisters – God created us to know Him. He put the evidence all around us.

The God who created the magnitude of the heavens by the power of His word. The God who is infinite and immortal and invisible wants us to know Him. He chose to reveal Himself. He even chose to become finite and mortal and visible. He took on time and matter.

Then He who exists beyond the confines of our universe shrunk down smaller than a universe – smaller than clusters of galaxies – smaller than a galaxy – smaller than clusters of stars – smaller than a giant star – smaller than our sun – smaller than our tiny planet – smaller than a single person.

He shrunk until He was the size of one single cell.

He chose to then be born.

He could now hunger and thirst and be cold and hurt. He could now die.

It defies belief.

And He did it because He chose to make some cosmic nobodies into somebodies.

To save us. To redeem us. To put His Spirit in us.

And on the final day when we rise again – we will be higher than the angels – and rule eternity with Him.

We who are nothing – we who rebelled – we are going to be made higher than the angels, made co-regents with Jesus, to reign over the restored, recreated, perfect universe forever.

No wonder the Psalmist says:

O Lord, our Lord,
How majestic is Your name in all the earth. Psalm 8:1