

# Does God Still Matter?



## 6 Reasons Why Believing in God Makes Sense

I have had many hundreds of conversations with college students over the last ten years and, in recent years, by far the most common attitude and response in conversations about spiritual things is one of disinterest. Lately, the topic of 'God' does not incite as much antagonization, rage, fear, or even critique as much as it does *apathy*. Conversations go something like this: "I don't know... I haven't really thought about God or spiritually at all... That seems like a great thing for you but I don't think I need it... Religion is dying out, right?... As long as everyone can pursue happiness and freedom, sure... God is fine." Or to put it succinctly, "God does not matter very much to me."

When you think about it, though, 'Who/what is God?' might be the most debated and thought-out topic of all-time. The conclusions drawn about the nature of God have had profound effects on the trajectories of billions of lives. It has shaped the world as we know it. It seems like it is a topic important enough to think about at least a tiny bit. Yet nowadays it is an afterthought, something to maybe think about when we are less busy or are older in life. Have you ever thought about this? That one of the most important and profound subjects in the world is so casually disregarded by many around us or even ourselves?

But, still, you may be wondering, why care about the concept of God when, as far as I can tell, I'm living just fine without it? Forget about the criticisms of the Bible, heaven or hell, or the historicity of the person of Jesus. Why even talk about this? It has been a challenge for Christians to respond to this sentiment and make a case for why the topic even warrants discussion. It is a bit like walking into an elementary school in rural Bangladesh and saying, "Ok, let's talk about NFL free agency." The topic is too foreign. We all need to back up a few steps. Christians seeking to have honest conversations about God must start by building a case why any of this might make rational sense in the first place. *They must be able to adequately answer the question, "Does God still matter?" before all others.* Likewise, secularists need to reckon with the very same question and all its implications. *We all* ought to be seriously investigating this question, neither presuming it as the Christian might nor ignoring it as the secularist might.

In his book "Making Sense of God", Timothy Keller, a writer and pastor in New York City, seeks to provide some answers to this modern dilemma. He contends that modern Westerners (that's us) need to deeply reexamine our presuppositions about how we think about life, what he calls "background beliefs." He makes a persuasive case that many of secularism's answers that we take for granted as true or at least 'true enough' fall flat under close scrutiny. When deeply contemplated and thought out, many of life's mysteries still remain unresolvable under a belief-system that does not include the existence of a god. For example, does life have meaning? What is right and wrong? Secularism's answers to those questions are actually remarkably incoherent compared to Christianity's. Therefore we ought to reconsider our doubts about God's existence. (That is quite a claim, perhaps one you disagree with on the surface. I'd invite you to read the entire book for more.)

So does God still matter? Summarizing the main points of "Making Sense of God", I will make the case there are *six good reasons why believing in God is sensible and reasonable*. These are *deductive* reasons for God. That is, they are explanations that reasonable people observing human nature and existence and the natural world might conclude. But these arguments will not definitively *prove 100%* that God exists, in the same way that I could not definitively *prove 100%* to you that I went to Lowe's today despite several pieces of evidence showing I certainly did. Rather, as you read I'd simply invite you to consider two questions: "Does this make sense?" and "Is plausible enough that it warrants further exploration?" It is my hope is that a case could be built to invite you to wonder- What if it actually makes more sense that God is real?

If God is real it would **Explain 3 Important Mysteries** many of us observe every day and **Offer 3 Important Hopes** many of us long for.

### ***Explaining 3 Important Mysteries***

#### **1. The Existence of God Explains Why the Universe Seems So Organized**

Imagine you are taking a walk in the woods when you come along when you come across hundreds of trees haphazardly scattered across a field in no supposed order. What would you conclude happened? Perhaps it was a wind storm, a twister, or simply nature's decay over time. You certainly wouldn't conclude it was the work of an architectural firm. Now suppose the very next day you came to the same spot and, instead of seeing scattered trees, you saw a beautiful two-story log cabin. What would you conclude? That it was purposeful, of course! It is more reasonable to think, upon observing extraordinary *order*, that men and women came along with purpose to *design* and construct the log cabin from the scattered trees. Would you 100% know that? Of course not, but it is beyond reasonable to conclude the cabin was *made*, not random. In fact it would be quite absurd to try to convince someone it was just pure luck. Most of us - implicitly, everyday - imply *design* when we see great *order*.

Our universe is similarly orderly and designed-looking. Nature has *purpose*. Everything has a productive cause. Rainforests produce the air we breathe. Ecosystems have balance and order. Even the odds we humans are alive on this planet is incalculably astounding. The earth is the perfect distance from the sun for our flourishing. Too close we burn, too far we freeze. The forces of physics are so fine-tuned for us that if the current exact balance of electromagnetic interaction, gravity, weak force, and strong force were off by one part of  $10^{100}$  from where it is now the universe could not sustain life.<sup>1</sup> The amount entropy in our universe is so precise that one Oxford scientist said the "improbability [of it occurring] was too big to write down."<sup>2</sup> Yet here we are, living and breathing on planet earth. What's more, DNA is described by its discoverers as a *language code*. And every language I've ever known has been created. It never simply happened to exist on its own. The universe seems to have a design and order about it that is hard to escape even in the highest levels of science.<sup>3</sup>

Could the conditions of our universe have happened by accident? Perhaps. But the question is which is more *likely* (back to our log cabin): that it was on purpose or that it was happenstance? Science's answers to this mystery (such as the multiverse theory) are lacking and unproven. Because of this, both sides (the atheist or the theist) require great *faith*. Both require admitting belief in something they don't fully understand. As Keller says, "Either you have to take a great step of faith to believe there is a God who designed the universe or you must take a great step of faith to believe there is not."<sup>4</sup>

#### **2. The Existence of God Explains Why He Have a Sense of Right and Wrong**

Why do we have a sense of right and wrong written into our psyches? Why is it that when we hear of a child being abused, a woman being raped, or a black man experiencing racism we know - we just *know* - that this is not the way it should be? Why are we filled with such rage when we see injustice and, on the other side of the coin, why do we smile when we see a viral video of an unexpected charitable act? It seems as though humans have an inherent sense of right and wrong or - to use a word out of fashion lately - morality. And this sense cannot be proven in a laboratory or tested to be valid or invalid. Something else must be going on.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig, William Lane. "Reasonable Faith" p158.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Andrew. "If God Then What" p52.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, Timothy. "Making Sense of God" p22.

<sup>4</sup> Keller, p22.

Keller points out that today we value the dignity of human life more than ever before. Benevolence and human rights is universally recognized as important and sacrosanct. Yet a crucial component to this value remains unanswered... “*Why* should we live this way? ...Our cultural institutions can give no answer.”<sup>5</sup> Social scientists would argue that morality has developed in our psyches over time because of our need for survival. There are several problems with this theory. First, survival-of-the-fittest promotes quite the opposite. It is eat or be eaten, not help the poor at your own expense. Nothing about the urge to sacrifice one’s self for a stranger promotes generational survival.

Second, if this theory supposes we have developed a sense of morality over time, then it follows that there was once a time at which we had an *un*-developed moral sense. This means that in 500 years humanity will hold different moral convictions than we do today and, therefore, modern morality will soon be antiquated. And so on and so forth. Therefore, this view ultimately still denies absolute morality and creates serious questions about the foundations of our current stance on human rights. “To hold that human beings are the product of nothing but the evolutionary process of the strong eating the weak, but then to insist that nonetheless every person has human dignity to be honored - is an enormous leap of faith against *all* evidence to the contrary.”<sup>6</sup>

The sciences, then, have merely shown us that moral *feelings* change over time (what we subjectively feel to be right and wrong) but that moral *obligations* (objective moral truth regardless of feelings or helpfulness to the species) ultimately still don’t exist. Keller argues that if you believe in objective moral obligations (and virtually everyone who is honest with themselves does) your worldview would be much more rational if it encompassed belief in a higher being. If our moral urges come from a creator and designer, justice has deep meaning beyond survivalism. Human rights matters because God created *all* human beings in His image (Genesis 1:26). Humanity has a divine mark, therefore each human deserves dignity. Regarding nature, the Bible tells us God gave it to us for stewardship, care, and protection the Earth (Genesis 1:29). It is possible to live a moral life without God? Sure, but deep down you do not *need* if you do not choose to. You could choose to punch your neighbor in the face and, so far as I can tell, there is nothing *de facto* “wrong” about that apart from a moral Author. Eventually that lack of meaning will erode our sense of obligation for one another. After all, what is the point? So if you really believe that we as a society and as human beings ought to be generous and seek justice regardless of feelings or cultural conditioning, that urge “makes much more sense in a world with God and a transcendent realm than in one without.”<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Existence of God Explains Why We Feel Beauty, Love, and a Sense of Self

Did you know that, scientifically, ‘you’ are un-provable? That’s right, but let me say it again in a different way in case that put your brain in a pretzel! Scientifically speaking (a world in which physical evidence must be present to support a theory), you as a conscious self cannot be verified by physical evidence. Yes, your *body* is certainly here. But I am talking about the deeper sense of who you are as a *being*. Your conscious. Your sadnesses, your longings, your career aspirations, what you find beautiful, when you say to yourself ‘do I like who I am?’ ‘this hurt my feelings’ and ‘this is euphoric.’ All of that, scientifically speaking, is only “the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”<sup>8</sup> You as a person don’t ‘exist’ in the scientific sense beyond the physical composition of your body parts and neurons. So our conundrum is this: We all live every day as if our consciousnesses exist (we think we are *selves* not just bodies) but none of us can figure out where this belief comes from.

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<sup>5</sup> Keller, p179.

<sup>6</sup> p49.

<sup>7</sup> p191.

<sup>8</sup> p224.

There's more: Why do we fall in love? Why do we find snow-capped mountain ranges beautiful? Why, when we experience a breakup, does it feel like much, much more important than simply 'failing to find a mating partner by which I may propagate my family for survival.' Modernity has not given us a satisfying answer to these questions. These immaterial urges that humans have - which are not 'test-tubeable' - must be reckoned with. We must either admit that we are merely a collection of molecules and that our urges are 'un-real' or we must admit that there must be something deeper beyond what our material selves. I would like to argue that this points us towards the transcendent. Our sense of personhood, our sense of love for others, and our sense of beauty lies in the beyond. "Truth, beauty, justice, love... remain fundamentally transcendent... I cannot invent mathematical truths, nor the beauty of a work of art... [they] impose themselves on me as if they come from elsewhere."<sup>9</sup> CS Lewis says it this way:

*"Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfactions for those desires exist. 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 desires: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find myself a desire which no experiences in this world can satisfy, the most probably explanation is that I was made for another world."<sup>10</sup>*

So one must wonder: Is it possible that my proclivity towards wanting to believe in something transcendent is there because that place actually exists? It is worth considering.

### **Offering 3 Important Hopes**

#### **4. The Existence of God Offers Identity**

Now, upon first reading the above title one might first recoil. God wants to offer me an identity? No thank you! After all, that runs counter to my personal freedom. Doesn't it sound much more appealing to create my own image? YOLO! Certainly, this is the mindset of our culture. 'Freedom' as modernity defines it runs strongly against the notion of finding one's identity in God and living under His authority. So allow me to briefly (again, using the framework of "Making Sense of God") make a case *against* the culture's definition of freedom and a case *for* freedom that comes from a relationship with God.

The definition of freedom has taken many forms over time but today it can be defined as: The right to choose one's own values and the ability to live however one sees fit, uncontrolled by any outside truths, morals, systems or institutions. Robert Bellah calls it "expressive individualism," the right to express one's "unique core of feelings" however one sees fit.<sup>11</sup>

But this definition of freedom has several faults. First, this freedom allows for the possibility of individual freedoms to contradict, inevitably resulting in the clash of freedoms and, eventually, the loss of the losing side's freedom. In this way, this version of freedom is actually just 'survival of the fittest's' freedom. And it opens up the possibility that some's evil or corrupt expression of their freedom might prevail. And that is no true freedom at all, of course. Second, anyone with any life experience would tell you that true pursuit of freedom requires the "strategic loss of some freedoms in order to gain others."<sup>12</sup> For example, if you believe it is your life's goal to be a doctor, you are going to lose a lot - a lot - of other personal freedoms in the process. Time, money, sleep, the social scene. Therefore, freedom to do one great thing actually requires *slavery* to that freedom and the *denial* of other freedoms. This means we can't be free to do *anything* after all, only some things.

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<sup>9</sup> Keller, quoting Luc Ferry, p227

<sup>10</sup> Keller, quoting CS Lewis, p91

<sup>11</sup> p119.

<sup>12</sup> p102

Finally, freedom is only freedom if it is within that object's design. This one is a tough one to swallow for some, but is an elephant truly free if he decides he wants to be an eagle and jump off a cliff? Is a paper airplane truly free if it decides it wants to be a wrecking ball? Real freedom is only possible within the constraints of one's design. Therefore, like the beauty of watching a sailboat being expertly navigated in high winds<sup>13</sup> or a master fly fisher using her rod exactly as it was intended, we must discover how to *unleash the beauty and intentionality of our design in order to truly live freely*. The attempt to find one's freedom within one's self will elude us and lead to desperate, anxious soul searching. This is why anxiety and loneliness rates are skyrocketing.<sup>14</sup> The pressure of discovering the answer to the question, "Who am I?" is crushing us rather than freeing us. We are craving an identity.

Christianity offers some hope amidst the immense pressure to 'find yourself' on your own: Someone who already deep adores you unconditionally and ascribes you self-worth no matter what. The Apostle Paul, the author of much of the New Testament, found this freedom. He was so freed by knowing God he was able to write (paraphrased), "I am don't care what others thing of me. I don't even care what I think of *myself*!! Only what God thinks of me controls me." (1 Corinthians 4:1-5) If we could come to grips with the fact that God fully adores us already, we could be free not only from the pressures of the outside world but the tyranny of own own expectations for ourselves. We could be "relieved of the terrible burden of being the ultimate source of your self and value" and no longer have to contort our life and force ourselves into our self-imposed goals.<sup>15</sup>

The Bible describes this identity that God offers as an *adoption* (Galatians 4, Ephesians 1). We are invited into His family as loving children and, just as adopted girls and boys, it is not based on our own resumé. It is completely upon His own desire to do so. In the Old Testament, the writer tell us God set His affection on His people not because of any of their doing, nor their own greatness, but because He loved them (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). Think about that for a second. God loves people because... He loves them! There was no other "because of..." or condition. This is radical, profound, and, if deeply considered, very freeing. This love paradoxically gives us great identity in Him yet also frees us from worrying so much about our identity, what Miroslav Volf calls living a life of a "de-centered center." We are able to identify the center of our life as God's love for us though Christ, and that causes us to be able to live selfless lives in love towards others rather than being consumed by ourselves.<sup>16</sup> This is true freedom, true identity according to God's design. If God does not exist, I am not sure where such profound approval, love, and grace could come from.

## **5. The Existence of God Offers Purpose and Meaning**

*Even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down and collapse and all trace of you effort will vanish... The problem is that although there are justifications for most things big and small that we do within life, none of the explanations explain the point of your life as a while... It wouldn't matter if you had never existed. And after you have gone out of existence, it won't matter that you did exist. -Thomas Nagel*

*You might deduce to simply have a good as time as possible. The universe is a universe of nonsense, but since you are here, grab what you can. Unfortunately you can't except in the lowest animal sense be in love with a girl if you know that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and*

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<sup>13</sup> p109

<sup>14</sup> Twenge, Jean. "Generation Me" p145

<sup>15</sup> Keller p138

<sup>16</sup> p147.

*that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behavior of your genes... You may in the lowest sense have a 'good time' but just in so far as it becomes very good... so far you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between your own emotions and the universe in which you (think you) really live. -CS Lewis<sup>17</sup>*

What is the point of life? According to Nagel and Lewis, modernity's answer is that there is none. Each generation and culture will adopt new mantras and new philosophies. But they are fleeting. Deep down we are fertilizer. This has led to a 'crisis of meaninglessness' in the West. Studies show that a lack of meaning in one's life leads to suicide, anxiety, and alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>18</sup>

Our strategies to cope with this existential crisis are few, but we do have options. First, we might do as Eastern philosophies instruct: Don't get too attached to anything. "Don't try to fulfill your desires; rather, control and manage them. To avoid having our inner contentment overthrown... do not become too emotionally attached to anything."<sup>19</sup> Second, we might prescribe our own meaning to life. But as we found in above regarding identity and freedom (point #4), that too falls flat and is quite anxiety-inducing. Third, cynicism. This is perhaps the most honest route yet also the most tragic: Embrace meaninglessness and do the best we can, knowing all along there is no meaning to life. This will make you not only live a fairly self-righteous life (Imagine going around reminding people that life has no meaning) but also one of no joy or fulfillment. It is dehumanizing, the lowest of low options.

Finally, rather than give up, self-prescribe, or detach, what if there was a place to rediscover the joy and actual meaning in life? Knowing God does exactly this. As Volf puts it, "attachment to God amplifies the enjoyment of the world."<sup>20</sup> Finding meaning in life from God does not mean closing oneself away from the real world and becoming a spiritual recluse, but rather awakening oneself to the reality that God created, designed, and loves the world for His glory and for our care and enjoyment. The problem with the world, then, (paraphrasing Augustine) is not that we love the world or each other too much but that *we love God too little*.<sup>21</sup> What has been corrupted is the *order* of our loves. With God as our first love, we discover true meaning in life where it seemed there was none.

A 17th-century theological manual puts it this way: The goal of life is "To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."<sup>22</sup> By finding oneself in the love of God and living life under His authority, life bursts forth in loving color and takes on meaning, giving us the ability to find context in the ups and downs of life. Perhaps the most inspiring example of this in Keller's book is the plight of African American slaves. Christian hope gave slaves something to live for despite great injustice and an otherwise bleak outlook. Rather than giving up on life, Christianity gave slaves "deep capacity for endurance... a belief that some day all wrongs would be made right... [and a] hope that their environment, with all its cruelty, could not crush."<sup>23</sup> To them, life in God offered unmovable resolve that triumphed over despair.

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<sup>17</sup> p67 and 68.

<sup>18</sup> Routledge, Clay, "Suicides Have Increased. Is This an Existential Crisis?" *The New York Times*, June 23, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> p78.

<sup>20</sup> Keller quoting Volf, p94.

<sup>21</sup> p92.

<sup>22</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q1.

<sup>23</sup> p158.

## 6. The Existence of God Offers a Coherent View of Life

I remember once in a counseling appointment (yes, I've seen a therapist) he said something that stuck with me: The mind is meant for order. That was his job, he told me; to help people think through their life and its circumstances and make order - make sense - of it all.

The same can be said of life as a whole: *Life was meant for order, for coherence, for sense.* It was meant to have meaning. It is best lived with a philosophy through which we live, act, think, and plan.

Perhaps one of the biggest strengths of a Christian worldview is its coherence. Modernity offers various solutions for various problems in the world but it has no unifying philosophy or internal logical consistency. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor remarks that this has caused "'extraordinary inarticulacy' about what our society's ideals should be."<sup>24</sup> It is no wonder we are a stressed and weary generation. It is a lot of work to piecemeal a worldview out of nothing, make it on our own, and try to live our life by it. In the end, I believe this ought to cause us to reconsider the *articulacy* and *coherence* of Christianity. The Bible shows not only 'the right way to live life' but it tells us a *story* of the relationship between humanity and God. It tells us *why* we are here, it tells us what went wrong, it tells us how it can be redeemed, and it tells us how that will happen. It shows us meaning, example, sacrifice, relationships, mistake-making, hope, redemption, grace, truth, justice, direction, boundaries, identity, and love all on one beautiful narrative in a way modernity cannot.

Taken as a whole, the sensibility of Christianity demands serious investigating at the least. In his conclusion, Keller argues that we cannot be indifferent to the claims of God's existence and more specifically the claims Jesus makes about Himself.<sup>25</sup> If there is any remote chance this could be true and real, ought it not demand a little looking into? Yes, Christianity certainly requires belief amidst some uncertainty and in admitting some truths are still unknown. But the same could also be said of secularism's various theories on life, humanity, and nature. I would invite you to take honest inventory of your beliefs and assumptions of how the world works. "Doubt your doubts."<sup>26</sup> Place the objections you may have about the existence of God under close scrutiny and see if they pass the test. The inarticulacy of secularism ought to cause us to wonder again- Maybe God *does* still matter even in the 21st century. Maybe belief in God in today's modern age is much more reasonable than it seems.

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Cru at the University of North Carolina, 2018

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Buy "Making Sense of God" by Timothy Keller <http://a.co/9qsqhJi>

### Other Reads

"If God Then What?" by Andrew Wilson  
"Mere Christianity" by CS Lewis  
"The Reason for God" by Timothy Keller

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<sup>24</sup> Keller, p71

<sup>25</sup> p244

<sup>26</sup> p38