

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 11, 2009)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Show Stoppers

The God Question

(Psalm 91:1)

Study #1

Introduction: Show stopping questions...

Sometimes a question is asked because to know the answer would be interesting, maybe even helpful.

We want to know, “*How do I get to your house?*” or “*What’s the price of gas today?*” or “*What are we having for dinner?*” or “*How did the Spurs do last night?*” or “*What’s the weather going to be?*”

But some questions are more pressing. Like, “*How do I get to the emergency room?*” That question is rarely academic! Or “*Why has our child suddenly become so withdrawn?*” That question is asked with some urgency.

Some questions are acute, even life and death, and must be answered post haste! And you could come up with your own list of pressing, have-to-get-them-answered-NOW, critical questions.

But then there is another category of questions that are just as critical but which are not so “time sensitive.”

I’m thinking about the questions that from time to time keep us awake late at night, the questions we ponder when we can’t sleep or when we’re all alone. The big ticket questions about life and the world and our place in it and right and wrong and suffering and injustice - and God.

Sadly, these are precisely the questions we may not give priority to addressing. We just don’t get around to it. Life is so busy. There are jobs to do and meals to fix and yards to mow and kids to raise and marriages to nurture and - you get the idea.

The questions are important, but they can be put off. Rarely are they emergency room stuff.

But if these questions are put off long enough, if they are not paid attention to and if they are not carefully considered, they eventually start to eat a hole in our soul. We crave answers to these questions.

And unaddressed and undealt with, these questions leave us ill-equipped to lead the hope-filled, joyful, confident lives we long to lead. Go long enough without addressing them and we will find ourselves hopeless and helpless.

So, for the next few weeks we’re going to address these kinds of questions on Sunday mornings. I’m calling them “Show Stoppers.” They are questions like:

- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Why is there evil in the world?
- Is the Bible reliable?
- Are miracles possible?
- Isn’t Christianity/Religion just a psychological crutch?
- If Christianity is true, why are there so many hypocrites?
- Why is Christianity so narrow?
- Salvation by faith, alone. Isn’t that too easy?

We’re starting this morning with a particular show stopper - maybe the biggest one out there. This question has occupied the minds of thinking people throughout history. It is a subject of very lively debate today. And it is something that each of us likely, in moments of reflection, reflects upon.

I’m talking about “the God question.” For the next few minutes we’re going to consider together the age-old question, “Does God Exist?”¹

¹ Obviously, the question is huge. The question is worthy of a lifetime of study and could easily take a semester to even begin to grapple with the issues. But, we’ll tackle it - at least begin to tackle it - this morning...

To that question, any one of us could give one of three different answers. We might say, “No”; we might say, “Maybe”; we might say, “Yes”.

We’ll take each possible answer in turn, beginning with “No.”

Option #1 - God Does Not Exist

Understanding Atheism

Atheism defined

To answer “No” puts us into the camp of atheism. The meaning of the word is pretty transparent. But Webster makes it absolutely clear.

Atheism: The doctrine or belief that there is no God; disbelief in the existence of a supreme being or beings.

An atheist is someone who holds to the belief that there is no God. And atheism is currently riding the crest of a wave of popularity. Atheism is all the buzz in this, the first decade of the third millennium.

Atheism’s current popularity

Richard Dawkins

One of the leading voices in atheism today is Richard Dawkins,² an Oxford professor and author of many books, including The God Delusion.³

² The New York Times Book Review has hailed Dawkins as a writer who “understands the issues so clearly that he forces his reader to understand them too.” Recently awarded the distinction of “public intellectual” in Britain, Sir Richard Dawkins is Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. Among his other books are The Selfish Gene (a 2006 reprint of his 1976 best-seller) and The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design, (1996). The title of this 1986 work, Dawkins’ second book, refers to the Rev. William Paley’s 1802 work, Natural Theology, which argued that just as finding a watch would lead you to conclude that a watchmaker must exist, the complexity of living organisms proves that a Creator exists. Not so, says Dawkins: “All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way... it is the blind watchmaker.” He also wrote, Climbing Mount

In a 2005 article in *Discover* magazine, Dawkins was referred to as “Darwin’s Rottweiler”⁴ for his fierce defense of atheistic evolution.

Prospect magazine voted him among the top three public intellectuals in the world, and Dawkins uses his considerable intellect to attack religion, focusing on what he believes to be its faulty base of logic and the suffering religion causes.

He critiques God in all his forms, from what he calls “the sex-obsessed tyrant of the Old Testament to the more benign (but still illogical) Celestial Watchmaker favored by some Enlightenment thinkers.” Dawkins rejects the major arguments for God and tries to demonstrate “the supreme improbability of a supreme being.”

He believes that the world would be a far better place without religion and holds people’s belief in God responsible for war, bigotry, and the abuse of children (among other evils), buttressing his points with historical and contemporary evidence.

Dawkins argues that belief in God is not just irrational. It is potentially deadly.

In the *Introduction* to The God Delusion, Dawkins asks his readers to imagine, with John Lennon a world without religion - and then goes on to catalogue the atrocities committed in the name of religion/God/god from the 9/11 attacks and suicide bombers, to the Crusades and Salem witch trials, from Israeli/Palestinian wars and Serb/Croat massacres and the Taliban, to “shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money.”

He expresses his hopes in writing The God Delusion with characteristic bluntness and frankness. “*If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.*”

Improbable, 1997. This foremost neo-Darwinian exponent explains the dazzling array of living things as the result of natural selection, “the slow, cumulative, one-step-at-a-time, non-random survival of chance variants.”

³ Dawkins chose the title of his book with particular and literal attention to the definition of the word “delusion”: a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder.

⁴ A quote from Alister McGrath, an Oxford theologian, in Dawkins’s God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life.

So, (Sir) Richard Dawkins is a leading voice in the atheist movement. But he is not the only voice. Christopher Hitchens also speaks out boldly against the whole notion of God.

Christopher Hitchens

Hitchens has engaged in a lively debate with Douglas Wilson in *Christianity Today* in which he argued, “Christianity is not good for the world.”⁵ An astute observer of politics, especially in the Middle East and the Balkans, Hitchens has written, God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.

And there are others.

Others

- Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier edited The Impossibility of God, in which various authors offer thirty two “disproofs” of God.
- Russ Kirk edited another book he titled, Everything You Know About God is Wrong.
- And there is a growing collection of books by those who have left Christianity for atheism (Christian no more Jeffrey Marks and Godless - how an evangelical preacher became one of America’s leading atheists, Dan Barker).

Clearly, atheism is alive and well in our world, today and is represented by some very bright people.

But if Richard Dawkins can say, bluntly, that he wants every reader of The God Delusion to become an atheist, I’ll be just as blunt to say that I want everyone to leave here today, seeing the compelling reasonableness of believing in God!

A Caution to the Thoughtful Atheist...

My own story includes some experience with atheism. I was raised in a family that attended church very regularly. However, the church we attended was not the kind that took the Bible seriously or that talked much about God.

The church culture was more about “Do the best you can.” It just oozed *niceness*.

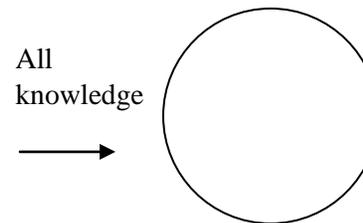
Well, like most young people, I had questions about God - and these questions were not being addressed at all in the church setting. So, as a teenager, I came to the conclusion that if God was not much of a big deal at church, then there must not be much to this whole “God” thing. And I became a professing atheist.

I’m not going to pretend that my atheism was a mature, reasoned, philosophically developed and rationally defensible atheism of the sort espoused by an intellect like Richard Dawkins. But I did believe that I was alone in the universe and that there was no God.

If I knew it all...

And that is atheism. Atheists claim that God does not exist. And to anyone who makes such a claim, today I would propose some cautions.

Consider that the sum of all knowledge is contained within a large circle. Everything that can be known in the universe exists within this circle.



Now, draw within the circle another circle that represents all of **your** knowledge. That circle will, of necessity be smaller than the larger circle of all knowledge.

This little exercise represents the reality that there is much to be known outside of our “knowledge circle.” It stands to reason, then, that outside of that which any of us knows, there is at least the *possibility* of the existence of God.

What makes atheism difficult to swallow is the absoluteness with which the position must be stated: **THERE IS NO GOD.**

⁵ May, 2007

That is what atheism is - the positive assertion that there is no God. And given the vast worlds of truth to which all of us have no access, it is unreasonable to say with certainty, "*There is no God.*"

To make that statement, a person would have to know everything that can be known (which, by the way, would make that person God!).

Atheism finds itself confronted by the same difficulty anyone faces who tries to prove a negative.

I might believe that there are no cats covered with pink-polka dots and green stripes. But to prove that thesis, I would have to round up ALL the cats there are - and the possibility will always exist that I might have missed the one pink-polka dotted green striped cat out there!

It is impossible to be certain that God is not out there somewhere beyond the limits of our knowledge.

But, if the atheist is right and there is no God, we should at least admit the implications of a universe with no God.

If there is no God...

Our hearts cry out for meaning. We hunger to have purpose in the grand scheme of things. But transcendent, ultimate meaning and purpose are precisely the things that are denied us if there is no God.

Without God, there is no ultimate basis for morality. Right and wrong have no transcendent mooring if we are just the product of an accidental combination of molecules in an ultimately impersonal universe.

A godless universe mocks human aspiration. Values like honesty and love have no more significance than treachery and selfishness - if God is not. Without God, Shakespeare's Macbeth had it right -

*"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."*⁶

Of course, we all live as if there is purpose. But without God, we are stripped of real purpose and dignity.

The irrelevance of preference

At the same time, while to my way of thinking, atheism is emotionally unsatisfying, *that* is no reason to discard it. There are lots of things in the world that are distasteful, but which are, nonetheless, realities.

Paying taxes is unpleasant. So is the presence of cancer, AIDS, and war all distressing. But I can't stick my head in the sand and disbelieve them just because I don't like them.

Depending on your perspective, atheism may or may not be distressing. But atheism's emotional impact does not mean that we should dismiss it or embrace it.

Reality is what reality is.

So, even if everyone believed in Him, He might NOT really exist. Everybody might be wrong. Conversely, if everybody denied His existence, He might still exist. Beliefs don't determine reality.

The bottom line is that neither Richard Dawkins, nor you nor anyone else has enough information to say, "*There is no God.*"

And if we cannot say that God does not exist, we are brought to the second option. God MAY exist.

Transition: From atheism to agnosticism...

The name for the belief that God DOES NOT exist is *atheism*. The name for the belief that God MAY exist is *agnosticism*.

Agnosticism is not a positive statement either way. It is just admitting that there is the possibility that there may be a force or a Person in the universe greater than we are - or there may not be.

But agnosticism is at least as unsatisfactory as atheism!

⁶ Macbeth, Act 5, scene 5.

Agnosticism says that we can't know for certain if there is or if there is not a God. If we can't answer "No" to the question (Does God exist?), agnosticism doesn't allow us to answer "Yes."

So what does a thinking person do who is stuck at the "maybe" of agnosticism? He or she looks for *evidence* that points in the direction of God's existence or away from that existence.

Second Option: God May Exist

"Evidence" vs. "Proof"

Notice that I said "evidence." I didn't say "proof." When we think of "proof" we are usually thinking of scientific or mathematical certainty.

The hard sciences like biology and chemistry demand proof based on repeatable, controlled experiment and the testing of theories.

But there are many kinds of knowledge besides scientific.

There is historical knowledge which, by definition, is not subject to repeatable, controlled experiments. Our knowledge of history lies outside the scope of scientific inquiry.

There is legal knowledge. Verdicts in courts of law are not based on scientific proof but on evidence. In civil trials, verdicts are rendered on the basis of the preponderance of evidence; in criminal trials the evidence has to be convincing beyond a *reasonable* doubt.⁷

In our search for evidence of the existence of God, we are not looking for scientific proof. (Surely, if God exists, He would not submit to a repeatable, controlled experiment!)

No, we are looking for sufficient evidence to warrant believing in Him (not exhaustive evidence).

And yes, this is where faith will come in.

⁷ Not beyond the shadow of a doubt or beyond all doubt.

But notice that faith in God is not a response **against** evidence. It will be a response **to** the evidence. Faith in God is not a leap into the dark of ignorance or a lack of evidence. It is a step taken in light of the evidence. (And if enough evidence cannot be gathered to warrant belief, then we will be smart to not believe.)

So where might we look to find evidence of God's existence? Most naturally, we will look for the fingerprints of God in the natural universe.

Philosophers (like Jean Paul Sartre) have long argued that the most basic philosophical question is this: Why does anything exist at all? (or, "How did everything get started?")

All around us we see a world of cause and effect. What cause might be sufficient to account for the effect we see on earth and in the heavens?

As I see it - and as many others have seen it - there are only three⁸ possible answers to the question as to the cause of everything there is. And we will take those possible answers one at a time.

One possibility is that the universe has simply always existed.

Why is there anything at all?

The universe is eternal

God is not necessary to account for the universe if it is eternally old. In that case, the universe has simply always been around.

Some people believe that. But that understanding has become very unpopular in recent decades. And there are at least three really good reasons why we should believe that the universe is NOT eternal.

⁸ There is actually a fourth possibility propounded by some philosophers. That is that the universe is an illusion. But this is a self-defeating proposition. It is like saying, "*This sentence is incorrect.*" The position lacks rational coherence and factual correspondence. Even the full-blown skeptic looks both ways before crossing the street!

The origin of the universe

Until recently the theory that the universe had no beginning and that matter is eternal was quite popular among scientists. The basis of that theory began to erode in the early 20th century as physicists discovered evidence that the universe is expanding.

This discovery led to what we refer to as the Big Bang Theory, the idea that the universe began at some finite time in the past and is continuing its expansion to this day.

In 1965 omnidirectional background radiation was discovered that prompted the vast majority of astronomers to accept the Big Bang Theory.⁹

Huge strides in Big Bang theory have been made since the late 1990s as a result of major advances in telescope technology as well as the analysis of data collected from satellites like the Hubble Space Telescope.

Scientists now have fairly precise measurement of many of the parameters of the Big Bang model, and have made the unexpected discovery that the expansion of the universe appears to be accelerating.

Current scientific models are pretty insistent that the universe began at a point in time. It is not eternally old.

But there is a second reason for not believing that the universe is eternally old. It involves the abundance of hydrogen.

The abundance of hydrogen

Hydrogen is being converted into helium through the irreversible process of nuclear fusion in the cores of the stars.

At the same time, new hydrogen atoms are not being formed in any significant amounts by the breakdown of heavier atoms. Thus, if the universe were infinitely old, there should be almost no hydrogen left. Yet hydrogen is the most common element in the universe.

⁹ This phenomenon supports the conclusion that the universe was once dense and hot.

And finally, the universe cannot be eternally old because of the second law of thermodynamics.

The second law of thermodynamics

This law of physics says that all things tend toward randomness and disorder. As time passes, entropy (disorder) increases.

Obviously, if the universe was eternally old, a state of equilibrium would exist, often called “heat death.” The stars will have burned out and there will not be enough gas in the steadily expanding galaxies to form new stars. In effect, the universe will have run down like a clock with no one to wind it back up.

Our universe cannot now be infinitely old because it has not yet worn down.

So, for these three reasons (an expanding universe points to a beginning; there is too much hydrogen; there is too much order) we can say that the universe is not eternally old. It began.

But a second way to explain the existence of everything there is has been offered. That is, that the universe simply emerged from nothing.

The universe emerged from nothing

There is a paper published on the website of *The Astronomical Society of the Pacific*¹⁰ that puts this idea forward.

The authors of the paper write, “If this admittedly speculative hypothesis is correct, then the answer to the ultimate question is that the universe is the ultimate free lunch! It came from nothing, and its total energy is zero, but it nevertheless has incredible structure and complexity...”

Now you should know that I know that I’m no scientist.

¹⁰ Far from a fringe group, this is a well-respected society, founded in 1889 (in San Francisco). It is the largest astronomical society in the world, bringing together professional and amateurs with the goal of disseminating astronomical information.

But, while I will assume that the authors of this paper are brilliant people, they are asking me to accept something that - at least as I understand science - does great violence to basic science.

That the universe comes from nothing requires me to accept that:

- nothing produces something;
- an effect (the universe) can be greater than its cause (nothing);
- an effect can come about without a cause altogether;
- mass can be created (voiding the first law of thermodynamics, which affirms the conservation of energy)

No one would seriously maintain that a house simply popped into existence without a cause. Yet some are willing to strain at these gnats while swallowing the camel that the entire universe came into an uncaused existence out of nothing.

Now, if the universe did not just “happen” and if the universe has not always existed, the sole remaining alternative for explaining the existence of everything is that the universe was created by an eternal Being.

The universe was created by an eternal Being

The universe is an **EFFECT** that is dependent on a **CAUSE**.

And the only cause sufficient to explain the universe is a being external to the universe, a being who exists whether anything else exists or not.

In short: God.¹¹

I think that this is compelling evidence for the existence of God! But it is not the only evidence we can find.

If we look closely, we discover more evidence in the way the world works and in the way WE work.

Consider the Rick Warren argument.

Third option: God Does Exist

The “Purpose-driven” Argument

Actually, what I’m talking about is usually referred to as the Teleological Argument. But “teleology” means “end” or “purpose.” So I’m going to ask you to think about the whole idea that the universe is “purpose-driven.”

We live in a purpose-driven UNiverse of order, complexity, and symmetry, not a MULTiverse of chaos and confusion.

We can find thousands of examples of order and purpose in the world, especially in living systems.

Consider any electronic device from a radio to an iPhone. It took great intelligence to put together the various components of these marvels. Yet they are child’s play when compared to the enormous complexity and subtlety of a living cell.

Even one-celled organisms like amoebas and protozoa are incredibly complex. Their complexity and design argues for a Designer.

Then, think about the nature of humanity.

Anthropological Argument

Human beings are capable of rational thought, a rich emotional life, and decisions of the will. How could an impersonal force cause conscious, personal beings?

Many psychologists as well as theologians believe that the human mind cannot be simply the physical brain, an organic electrochemical mechanism which evolved as a result of irrational causes.

Human thought transcends the brain and the material world as it reflects on abstract concepts like justice, wisdom and spirit and beauty.

And consider, too, the evidence for the existence of God reflected in the non-utilitarian love of people for beauty.

¹¹ What has preceded is sometimes referred to the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

Aesthetic Argument

Of course, there are differences in taste between people as to what constitutes beauty. But, all things considered, there is an amazing degree of consensus regarding what is beautiful and great in art, literature, music, and architecture.

More to the point, though, there is in each culture or sub-culture an agreement that **something** is beautiful and great. The human capacity for the love of beauty that transcends the material world is best explained by a Creator.

And finally, consider people's moral nature.

Moral Argument

Morality, a sense of right and wrong, is a universal human phenomenon. There are variations as to what is moral in different cultures, but in all cultures, certain character traits are revered above others. Virtue is esteemed.

Man's moral consciousness requires a personal God to have any ultimate meaning.

Now, none of the evidences I've suggested will give the kind of absolute proof that will overwhelm someone into believing in God. But taken together, I think that this evidence can help anyone who is open see the reasonableness of believing in God.

And now, having considered all this, SO WHAT?

Conclusion:

Is "the God question" simply academic? Or is it really all that important to wrestle with the question of the existence of God?

Yes - it is critically important!

We can be wrong on many things and suffer only slightly. But to be wrong on **THIS** one issue is to suffer eternal loss.

A French philosopher and mathematician who lived in the 17th century, Pascal, tried to convince his unbelieving friends to take the matter of God's existence seriously.

Referred to as "Pascal's Wager", the reasoning runs like this:

- If God does not exist and you believe in Him, your life is probably richer for believing in Him; and if He doesn't exist and you don't believe in Him, you have lost nothing.
- If, however, God does exist and you believe in Him, you have gained an abundant, joyful life and will have an eternal reward; but if you don't believe in Him and He is real, you have lost, not only in this life, but in the life to come.

Pascal's Wager has been criticized for urging people to fake belief in God as a way of hedging their bets. But that was not at all what the Wager was ever about.

Certainly, if there is a God, He would be able to see through such a counterfeit faith. Pascal simply wanted his friends to take the whole matter of God seriously.

And so do I. I want you, today, to take the matter of God seriously. It is no exaggeration to say that **EVERYTHING** hinges on this question! There is no more important theme to give your attention to than this: Is God real? Does He exist?

Won't you be willing to go from this place and investigate "the God question" for yourself?