

## Is God Real?

Jeremiah 29:13, Pr. 8:17

Florence Foster Jenkins was one of the most famous sopranos of the 1930s and 40s. She was famous for being a *terrible* singer. Jenkins was an heiress who could afford to rent out the Ritz-Carlton for her annual recitals. Critics called her “The Tone-Deaf Diva,” “The Queen of the Sliding Scale,” and “The Terror of the High C’s.” But Jenkins just assumed they were jealous of her immense talent. In 1944, she gave a benefit concert at Carnegie Hall. Tickets sold out weeks in advance. The recording of that concert is the third most requested album from Carnegie to this day. You can hear some of it on youtube, and it’s awful. Jenkins thought she was an amazing singer, but the sincerity of her beliefs didn’t change the fact that she couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. We’re beginning today a series of sermons called Reasons to Believe. We recognize that it’s not enough to be sincere in our beliefs. We must make sure that what we believe in is true. There are a great many people in our world today who have serious questions about the Christian faith. We want to look at some of those questions honestly. This isn’t going to be a typical sermon series. Instead of focusing on a particular Scripture, I’ll be answering common objections to orthodox Christian beliefs. In this message today, I want to talk about why belief in God makes more sense than atheism. I also want to answer three very persuasive arguments against God’s existence. And finally, I want to talk about how you can know for sure that God is real.

Imagine I went to see my friend at his workplace. I thought that he was there because I saw his car in the parking lot. When I went into his office, his secretary told me he was in. I also saw notes in his handwriting sitting on her desk. I could see a light on in his office, and hear sounds that indicated he was inside (the creaking of his chair, his muffled voice talking on a phone). Because I showed up that day with the assumption that he would be there, all of these signs merely confirmed my assumption. On the other hand, what if a skeptical person came into that office, someone who doubted whether my friend had actually showed up to work that day? They would interpret the evidence very differently. They might see the car in the parking lot and say, “There are lots of those kinds of cars on the road today.” They might think my friend’s secretary was mistaken, that she simply assumed he had come in, when he really hadn’t. Or maybe she was even lying to cover for him. The notes on the desk could be easily forged, or left over from the previous day. And as for the sounds in his office, those could be coming from another nearby office. Do I know God is real? Yes. I have gone into the office and I am blessed by His grace to live in His presence. There are evidences in the world today that show us He is there. But these clues may not be convincing to you. It depends on your assumptions. If you want God to be real, then you will see evidence for Him everywhere. If on the other hand, you are convinced that there is no God, if the existence of God would mean changing your way of thinking or living, and you don’t want that to be true, then no amount of evidence will convince you. The question I want you to ask today is, do you want to believe? If the answer is yes, then I think God has given us more than enough evidence to know that He is real, to erase all of your doubts. If the answer is no, let me just ask you to open your mind to the possibility. As Pascal famously said, if you bet that God is real and He’s not, you’ve lost nothing. If you bet that He’s not real and He is, then you’ve lost everything.

So what are these evidences for God’s existence? There are dozens of very convincing proofs of the reality of God, and I won’t try to cover them all today. I want to recommend two good books on the subject: *The Reason for God*, by Tim Keller, and *The Case for Faith*, by Lee Strobel. Personally, I see

evidence of God in history, in the history of the Church and most of all **in the person of Jesus**. More than any other single thing, the life and teachings of Jesus—and His resurrection from the dead—convince me that there is a God. We'll talk more about that next Sunday. I see evidence of God's existence **in the Bible**, the most amazing book ever written. When I study the Bible, I am convinced that it is not a human document. We'll talk about why in two weeks. I see evidence of God **in nature**. The beauty and complexity of nature tell me that someone created all of this. Could it be the result of chance? I suppose it could, just like an orangutan sitting in a room with an electric typewriter could theoretically write *War and Peace*. But if I visited the monkey's room and found *War and Peace* sitting in a stack of papers, would I assume that the monkey had randomly punched keys and this novel had come out, or would I assume that some intelligent human had done this? The beauty and complexity of nature don't prove that God is real, but they leave clues that indicate God's existence is far more likely than not. I believe that God is real because of **the transforming power of faith in Him**. I have seen too many people radically changed by Christ for it all to be a fairy tale.

One more clue is **the idea of morality** itself. Where have we come up with this idea that some things are right and others are wrong? In the animal Kingdom, the law of the jungle rules. Imagine a scene in the African Savannah. Hundreds of animals are grazing in the fields. Suddenly, a lioness attacks and kills a smaller, weaker animal, and begins to eat it. Do any of the other animals stand up and say, "Wait a minute. That baby wildebeest had rights?" No, they go on about their business as if nothing had happened. Now, imagine a busy street in downtown Houston. A man attacks a woman on a sidewalk and begins dragging her toward a waiting car. What happens? People scream. They pull out cell phones and call the police. Some even physically intervene to save the woman's life. If he's caught, the eyewitnesses are eager to testify against him, because we all know that this kind of behavior has to be punished. Where did we get the idea that someone who is stronger can't do whatever he wants to someone who is weaker? If we are only more highly evolved mammals, why would we value concepts like courage, self-sacrifice, and love? Why do we think that society is supposed to protect and provide for those who are disadvantaged, when the law of the jungle would say these people deserve to die? These characteristics don't come from some evolutionary desire to protect ourselves and strengthen our species. They come from somewhere else. This sense of right and wrong is a clue that we are made in the image of God. At heart, we all know God is real. Even today, in an America that has never been less religious than it is today, over 90% of our neighbors still believe that God is real.

Yet more than ever before, people have serious objections to faith in God. I want to look at three of these problems very briefly.

1. The problem of evil and suffering. George Barna asked American adults, "If you could ask God one question, what would it be?" The number one answer was, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?" This is a question that turns people away from faith, and that shakes the faith of believers. I imagine every one of us has had some personal trial that has caused us to question God. Why, Lord, did you not prevent this? All of us have at times watched the news in horror and asked, "Where is God in all of this?" This isn't unique to our generation, by the way. Biblical characters like Abraham, David, Job and Jeremiah all questioned what God was up to in the midst of personal and national tragedy. So how can God be real, especially the all-powerful, all-loving God of the Bible, if the world is such a messed-up place? Scripture tells us first of all that God created a world without pain, sorrow or death, a place where humanity and nature coexisted peacefully with God. But human sinned warped and polluted this world.

With that in mind, it is honest to say that when bad things happen, it wasn't God's will. Jesus said God knows when a sparrow dies, and our lives are of infinitely more importance than theirs. So God suffers when we suffer; He weeps when we weep. When the tsunami killed hundreds of thousands of people on December 26, 2004, we can be sure that no one on Earth grieved more than our God.

The Bible teaches that God is redeeming this world, remaking it into a place that is perfect again, just as He is shaping us into people who will never sin again. When that New Earth comes, pain, sorrow and death will be banished forever. In the meantime, He waits to bring about His New Earth, because He wants to give all people the opportunity to repent and be saved. But even that doesn't fully answer the question. The Bible says that God can and sometimes does intervene. He can supersede nature and rescue people from harm. So why doesn't He do that? When your children are very young, you sometimes have to put them through very unpleasant experiences. Think about taking them to the pediatrician for shots. Picture the look in her eyes as you hold her very still so that this awful man can stick a sharp needle into her skin. When Kayleigh was two, she had to have tubes inserted into her ears. She cried when the nurse carried her away from us to perform the surgery, holding out her hands, begging us to rescue her. Physically, I could have snatched her away from that nurse and run out of that hospital. I wanted to do exactly that. But I knew that she needed the surgery. Hard as it was for me, I allowed her to experience fear, pain and a sense of abandonment so that she would have healthy ears. I believe this is the answer to the problem of evil and pain: Like small children, we think God should protect us from all suffering. But He loves us enough and is wise enough to know that some pain is necessary. What we interpret as abandonment is really His wisdom and love. It hurts Him to see us suffer, and He looks forward to the day when all that pain is gone forever.

2. The problem of science. It's common today to believe that science and faith are at war with each other. Many very educated people have walked away from faith in Christ because they thought they had to choose one or the other. "I want to believe in Jesus, but I have studied science. I can't commit intellectual suicide." Let me just say that I think this is a false dichotomy. Science and faith are not in conflict, even if sometimes both scientists and Christians behave as if they are. In fact, a recent survey indicated that 40% of scientists today believe in a personal God. Sir Francis Collins, the founder of the human genome project, wrote in his book *The Language of God* that it was his scientific study that convinced him of the existence of a creator and led him from atheism to Christianity. There are many similar stories.

You might respond, "But I have studied the geological records, and I am convinced that the theory of evolution is true. How can I reconcile that with what the Bible teaches?" There are certainly plenty of people who believe that Genesis 1 must be taken literally, that God created the world in six 24 hour days, and that any scientific evidence to the contrary must simply be ignored as false. There are also Christians—I am talking about Bible-believing Christians—who believe Genesis 1 is a poetic description of the creation, and that Genesis 2 is the more literal, factual description of how the world came to be. Some of these Christians believe that God used evolution to bring life into the planet. Some believe that evolution has been at work in the story of this world, and that God has intervened at key moments, including the creation of man. Then there are people, like me, who aren't sure HOW God created all that exists, we just know that He did, and that it was very good. If you are someone who accepts the theory of evolution, you must understand that doesn't answer all our questions about the origins of life. Evolution is a fine, very plausible theory about how different species came to be what they are today, but where did

life come from? Evolutionary biologists are still stumped when they try to figure out how inanimate matter became living. For that matter, where did all that matter come from? The prevalent belief today is that the universe was created in a Big Bang some 15 billion years ago. But who or what caused the Big Bang? And what was there before that? Science can't answer those questions. But an infinite, all-powerful God sounds like a plausible explanation to me.

3. The problem of faith. Why doesn't God relate to us face to face instead of making us believe in Him by faith? "Why does God have to play this game of hide and seek with us? If I were God and wanted people to know me, I would appear to them personally. I would go out of my way to convince them. Why doesn't God go on national TV and address the entire world?" The short answer is that we cannot see God and live. Our own sin has separated us from Him and ruptured the intimate relationship He wants to have with us. Only once we are fully redeemed will we be able to see Him face to face. "Okay," you may say, "But the Bible talks about God appearing to people in various ways. Why doesn't He still do that?" Who says He doesn't? The Bible says that God has appeared visibly or audibly to people at key moments in His plan, but it was never for the purpose of convincing people who were skeptical. Look at the life of Jesus. He had plenty of opportunities to work miracles when it would've persuaded skeptics. The Pharisees demanded a confirming sign. Herod, on the day of Christ's death, wanted to see a miracle, but even though it might have saved His life, Jesus refused. Even after the resurrection, Jesus didn't appear to anyone who didn't already know Him. Why did He not go before the Sanhedrin in His resurrected form and say, "Do you see now what a mistake you made?" God's goal is not to make us believe in His existence. He wants for us to know Him, to love Him, and to experience a true relationship with Him. Coming audibly or visibly won't make that happen, so God doesn't do it. Besides, aren't all important relationships based on faith? A child trusts that his parents have his best interests in mind. I trust that Carrie really does love me, and isn't secretly scouting for someone taller, richer and better looking (although there are plenty of candidates). I see plenty of evidence that she loves me. If I were to say, "I need for you to prove that you love me," it wouldn't be the basis of a very good relationship, would it?

That brings me to my final point. I said at the beginning that I would tell you how to know for sure that God is real. The answer is to seek Him. It is one thing to look at this as an intellectual exercise, to study the evidence for and against the existence of God. That's a fine pursuit, and if that's what you're doing, I wish you well. But Jeremiah 29:13 says *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.* Proverbs 8:17 says *Those who seek me, find me.* Think back to that analogy from William Lane Craig about going to visit a friend at His office. You can see it as an intellectual exercise. You can sit out in the lobby or the parking lot playing amateur Sherlock Holmes, piecing together the evidence and trying to guess whether he's really in the office or not. Or you can do the most logical thing: You can walk into his office and see for yourself. I don't need evidences of God's existence. I know Him personally. And you can too. If you are not sure whether God is there, or if you are a believer who is caught in doubts, the best advice I can give you is to seek Him. Start reading the gospel of Matthew and keep on going until you finish the New Testament. Pray every day and say something like this, "Lord, I want to know you and experience a relationship with you. Show me how to seek you. Teach me who you are and how you want me to live." Hang out with some people who really seem to know Jesus—not just religious people, but men and women who walk with Christ. See the activity of God in their lives. Find a place to serve in Jesus' name. Worship Him in this place with nothing held back. He has promised us

that when seeking Him becomes the highest goal of our hearts, we will find Him. And we won't need evidence anymore.