

**A God Who Gives Reasons**  
**(A Sermon given at BridgePoint Bible Church, April 6, 2014)**

It was not long ago that I sat in a dining hall at Rice University and a student asked me how I would respond to the suggestion that Christianity is nothing more than a need projection, that it is simply a story that helps some people meet their emotional needs. She had been in a conversation with another student and did not know how to respond. Is Christianity something that people just made up to feel better? How would you respond to that question?

Two summers ago my family and I traveled to Washington, D.C. While there, we were able to visit an old college friend of Ann and me. She asked me about my studies. I told her some of the questions that I was studying, such as how can we know that God even exists, how can there be a good and all-powerful God in the world when there is so much evil in the world, or how do we know that the Bible gives a reliable account of what happened. And this lawyer who was trained at the very best of schools responded by saying, "There are answers to questions like that?"

The response was not much different when Ann and I took some neighbors out for dinner a couple of months ago. Somehow the conversation came up about my studies, and once again I mentioned some of the questions I was addressing and the man said, "I have those questions too."

Not long ago I received an email from a gal who had been confronted with the question of what happens to those who never hear about Christ. She needed a reasonable answer to this question but did not have one.

Not long before that I received a note from my nephew. He has lots of questions about Christianity. He was quite certain that Christianity had been changed throughout the centuries, and that in particular it had changed its position because of scientific evidence. For him, it is clear that issues like this are real barriers to faith.

It was a great privilege two months ago to be in with our middle schoolers and high schoolers and help answer some of their questions. They had been presented with the argument that since everything that comes into existence has a cause, and since the universe came into existence, it too must have a cause. And further it had been explained that this cause must be God. But their question was why doesn't God need a cause, or as one student put it, what caused God?

Now I suppose that I could just be a magnet for the *few* people who have questions like this, but something tells me that this is not the case. Something tells me that there are countless people that have these questions. Those are some of the very questions that your co-workers, and relatives, and neighbors, and children, and perhaps even you have.

And I wonder how it is that you answer those questions. Perhaps you answer others by saying, "That's a really good question," and leave it at that, hoping the trajectory of the conversation changes. You might even respond to questions by saying, "The Bible says..." which in many cases might be helpful, but which doesn't necessarily do a whole lot of good for someone who has questions about whether the Bible should be trusted in the first place. Or perhaps, you get rather defensive when such questions come up (I certainly have at times), thinking that in some way if you get emotional that it will make up for the lack of a well-reasoned answer. Or maybe you say inside yourself that I don't know how to answer a question, so I will just love the person into the kingdom. And undoubtedly for some recipients of your love that is a good tactic, but I can tell you for many out there, your love will make you nothing more than a nice, or tolerable, religious person if you can't give some clear explanations to some very reasonable questions. Or perhaps, you take people's questions as simply a lack of faith and proof that they are not among God's chosen.

Now, as you might guess, I don't think that any of these are really the best response when people have good questions about God and Christianity. I think that you and I are called to give reasonable answers to people's reasonable questions. The apostle Peter wrote just that in his first letter: "**But set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess**" (1 Pet 3:15). That verse alone should be enough to tell us that we can't just keep saying, "It's a mystery, or you just have to take things by faith," when there are a better explanations than that. But more than just remind you of this command from Peter to be those who have answers for the hope that we possess and among those who defend the faith in a world that is asking questions, I want to show you that God himself has always been one who is willing to give sound reasons to believe. He is a God who over and over gives evidence for that which he calls us to believe in. I want to show you this both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

Many of you are familiar with the story of Moses. Moses was born into captivity. The Jewish people has been enslaved by the Egyptians. Through some rather remarkable circumstances, however, Moses ended up as a member of Pharaoh's household. His growing up life was one of privilege. But despite this life of privilege he could not stand to see his own people, the Jews, suffer as

they did, so he sought to start an insurrection of sorts. Well, the Bible tells us it didn't go too well. Not only were the Egyptians not impressed, but even his own people were not impressed and soon Moses found himself eking out a life in the desert.

Fast forward now some forty years. God shows up to Moses in a burning bush, and he tells Moses that he wants him to go back to Egypt and free his people. Now, as you might imagine this idea didn't go over too well with Moses. If he couldn't even get his own people to side with him, how was he going to be able to get the Egyptians to free the Jews? In fact, in reply to God's plan Moses asks this question, **“What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you?’”** (Ex 4:1). Now, I suppose that God could have at this juncture said, “Tell them to have faith.” And God would not have been wrong in saying such. No doubt the people needed to have faith, but that is not what God did. Instead, God provided evidence of Moses' calling to free his people so that people would have a solid reason for trusting what Moses had to say. What was that evidence? He told Moses that if he put his hand in his pocket it would turn leprous in front of the people and he told him that if he threw his staff to the ground that it would turn into a snake. And if that is not enough than take some water out of the Nile and pour it onto the ground and it will turn into blood. These were the signs, these were the evidences that would provide the people with good reasons to follow Moses. Again, God could have said, “Just have faith,” but in Scripture we see that he does much more than that. He provides solid reasons for why people should believe.

Now let's move forward to later in Moses' life—to a time just before he would die. He is providing some final instructions to the Israelites before they enter the promise land. He tells them, and you will find this in Deuteronomy 28-30, that if they are careful to follow in the ways of the Lord, that things will go incredibly well for them, but if they don't things will go terribly. In other words, what Moses says is, “I have given you a bunch of laws from God. You might wonder if these laws really come from God or whether it is worth it to live up to them. And so God is going to make it clear to you. He is not simply going to tell you to have faith, he is going to make it very reasonable for you to have faith by the outcomes that will come upon you when you obey or disobey God.

And if you are familiar with the Old Testament, you know that this is just what God did. Whenever the Israelites obeyed God, such blessing came that the surrounding nations could hardly help but acknowledge God, and when they disobeyed God such tragedy hit that the Jews became a mockery.

Let me give you one picture of this playing out on the positive side. Solomon was the third king of Israel. He had been appointed king by his father David.

And when Solomon came to the throne he determined to follow God and to seek His wisdom. And in no time Solomon not only became the wealthiest and probably most powerful man of his day, he also became remarkably wise in the administration of his kingdom and became the author of 3,000 proverbs, 1,005 songs, and manuals on botany and animals for all the known species of his time. He followed God and the blessings of God were showered upon him just as Moses predicted in Deuteronomy. But here's the other aspect of Solomon's story, because of Solomon's wealth and wisdom he had a constant flow of foreign guests. One of these guests, the Queen of Sheba, is highlighted in 1 Kings 10. And when she sees his wealth and hears his wisdom, she is astounded and declares the glory of God. Her words, in fact, are this: **"...The report I heard in my own country about your wise sayings and insight was true! <sup>7</sup>I did not believe these things until I came and saw them with my own eyes. Indeed, I didn't hear even half the story! Your wisdom and wealth surpass what was reported to me...<sup>9</sup>May the LORD your God be praised because he favored you by placing you on the throne of Israel! Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he made you king so you could make just and right decisions."** To paraphrase, the Queen of Sheba says, "I couldn't believe what was said about you and I could not believe what was said about your God until I saw the evidence." And when she saw the evidence she worshipped God. God did not expect her to worship based on blind faith, but based on the evidence of his work in the world. And that is because that is the kind of God he is. He is the kind of God who does the miraculous to give time and space verification of his Word. He is the kind of God that sends his prophets to declare beforehand what will happen. He is the kind of God that gives wisdom so that we can by ourselves taste and see that the Lord is good. He does this because he is God who does not shy away from giving us very rational reasons to believe in him.

Well, that is a bit from the Old Testament indicating that God is a God who willingly sets out the evidence and reasons that men and women and boys and girls from every nation might know him and trust him. Now, let's turn to the New Testament and see if we recognize the same understanding of God.

First, let's consider the Gospels and the aim of their writing. We'll begin with the book of Luke and look at its opening words. Luke writes in the first chapter:

**<sup>1</sup>Now many have undertaken to compile an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup>like the accounts passed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning. <sup>3</sup>So it seemed good to me as well, because I have followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent**

**Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know for certain the things you were taught.**

In these words we see the intent of Luke's writing. The immediate audience of Luke's gospel is a man named Theophilus, a ruler of some sort. And he wants Theophilus to be certain about the things he had apparently already heard about Jesus. But in order for Theophilus to be certain, Luke does not write a short exhortation like this: "Theophilus if you are wavering at all in your belief, you just need to have faith." Instead, he lays out a detailed account of Jesus. He seeks out first-hand eyewitness, in accordance with proper historical standards of Luke's day, and he puts them together not in a haphazard way, but in an orderly manner so that they can make sense to his reader. No doubt the book of Luke is an account of Jesus, but it is specifically an apologetic account, that is it was written for the purpose of providing a reasonable basis for belief.

Now consider the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew's audience was different. He was writing to the Jew, to the Jew who was well versed in the Old Testament and the prophecies concerning the Messiah. As such, he lays out the story of Jesus similar to Luke, but at every turn he is sure to show how the life of Jesus matched up to the Old Testament predictions. Matthew understood that if his fellow Jews were going to be convinced of the Gospel, they needed to be given evidence that was meaningful to them. Others before and after Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, but it was Jesus who was authenticated by the fulfillment of prophecy. By telling of Jesus' actions and then comparing it with Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah, Matthew was engaging the Jew's minds to see Jesus for who he is. Do you see then that Matthew, like Luke, was written with the expressed purpose of providing sufficient evidence for rational belief? And I would argue the same is true for the Gospels of Mark and John as well.

Now, let's turn to Jesus in particular, and discover how Jesus himself acted as an apologist, that is, how he provided evidence and sound arguments to encourage reasoned belief. Look with me at John 5:31 and following:

**<sup>31</sup>"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. <sup>32</sup>There is another who testifies about me, and I know the testimony he testifies about me is true. <sup>33</sup>You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth...**

**<sup>36</sup>"But I have a testimony greater than that from John. For the deeds that the Father has assigned me to complete — the deeds I am now doing — testify about me that the Father has sent me. <sup>37</sup>And the Father who sent me has himself testified about me...**

**<sup>39</sup>“You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me, <sup>40</sup>but you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life.”**

Do you see that Jesus names four sources of evidence? He says, “Don’t believe in me just because I say believe (that sort of call would not be enough). Instead, he says, “Believe in me because of the evidence of John and the evidence of God’s voice from heaven that spoke of me. And because of my deeds and because of the way my life matches up with Scripture.”

Now, Jesus was quite aware that he was God Incarnate. He did not need testimony from these various sources to convince himself. But he speaks of these others sources of testimony anyway because he knows that it is important to provide this evidence if his hearers are going to trust in what he says about himself. Jesus knows that having been made in the image of God, we are reasoning creatures, and that as reasoning creatures we have a need for evidence if we are going to have well-grounded beliefs. Yes, Jesus in the Gospels calls people to faith, but the call to faith he makes is not faith in faith, it is faith based on sound and reasonable evidence.

Consider with me Jesus’ dealings with John the Baptist. John the Baptist got himself in trouble with King Herod by criticizing his adulterous marriage and thus found himself in prison. Things were not looking good for John and in the midst of his despair doubt creeps in about the identity of Jesus. Here he was the one who had publically declared Jesus the Lamb of God. Here he was the one who had said that Jesus must become greater and that he was not fit to tie the sandals on the feet of Jesus. And yet when death lingered over him, he sent out his disciples to ask a question. We see that question in Matthew 11:3: **“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”**

So how might you expect that Jesus answered him? Most certainly Jesus could have told John’s disciples to go back and tell John that he simply needed to have more faith and not waver at this point of persecution. He would not have necessarily been wrong in doing so, but that’s not what he does. Instead, he answers John’s disciples in this way <sup>4</sup>...**“Go tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them.”** In other words, what he tells them is to go and report the evidence to John. Because that is what John needed in the moment. John did not need more admonition, he needed a solid answer to his question.

Now, let’s for a moment take a look at one of Jesus’ miracles. Jesus often uses his miracles as an apologetic for his own divinity. Take, for example, the time

when four men drop a paralytic in the middle of house while Jesus is speaking. When Jesus sees the man, he tells him that his sins are forgiven. Now that is nice. I am sure that anyone would like to be told that their sins are forgiven, but the question is how would anyone know the sin had actually been forgiven? Could not have any religious leader in Jesus' time said that? I am sure if you had a forceful and dynamic enough personality you could get a few people to believe that you could actually forgive sins. But Jesus was not going to leave the matter up to speculation or require that people simply take him at his word. He wanted people to know that the hidden transaction of forgiving sins had taken place and so he says in Mark 2: **10But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," — he said to the paralytic — 11"I tell you, stand up, take your stretcher, and go home."** In effect, Jesus argues, "If you don't believe my words by themselves at least believe me based on my miracles, by what you can see and verify." In fact, in the book of John, Jesus goes on to say, **"Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father"** (Jn 10:36-38, NIV). Do you see then that Jesus is intent on providing us evidence and sound reasons for believing in Him?

Jesus sound reasons were not always connected to miracles. On some occasions the reasons simply came through sound arguments. Philosophers have labeled one form of logical argument an *a fortiori* argument. An *a fortiori* argument takes people's confidence in one statement to argue in favor of a second statement, since there is more reason to believe the second statement than the first. For example, I might say. You feel confident about staying at a hotel X because it has a 3-star rating. Hotel Y has a 4-star rating, so if you feel comfortable in staying in Hotel X you should definitely be comfortable in staying in a Hotel Y. That is an *a fortiori* argument. Now, take a look with me at Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7. He says:

**7"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. 8For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. 9Is there anyone among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11If you then, although you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!**

In other words, Jesus begins by saying you should ask for things from God. But then he goes to defend the reasonableness of asking God. He says, "Hey parents are evil, aren't they? Yet they still give good things to their children

when they ask. You believe that, don't you? Well, if you believe that, then you should most certainly believe that God, who is utterly good, will give good gifts to his children." An *a fortiori* argument. An *a fortiori* argument for being willing to ask things of God.

Now, why do I share this with you? To impress you with Jesus' skills in philosophy and logic? No, I show it to you, because I want you to recognize that Jesus understands that as human beings, as those made with minds, he does not call us to enter into faith blindly. Faith is to be entered into with sound arguments and sound evidence and Jesus is more than willing to give it.

Now, considering that we see God in the Old Testament and God Incarnate in the New Testament explicitly providing reasoned arguments for placing one's trust in God, we should not be surprised when we read the words of Peter that I shared when we began this morning: "always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess." God is a remarkably gracious God. He could just sit afar and every once in a while yell, "Believe!" But in his graciousness, he purposely sets out evidences and reasons from the untold number of prophecies fulfilled to the coming of his own Son who made people walk and see and then rose from the dead to the logical arguments set forth in many of epistles to the cosmological constants that govern the universe to the Dead Sea Scrolls that validate the accurate transmission of the Old Testament text to the dreams and visions of Jesus that countless millions of Muslims around the world continue to have, all so that we might say, "Now, I see. It all makes sense. You are God and I am yours." And if this is God's way with humanity, then I believe it ought to be our way with humanity as well. That is, we too should be prepared to give reasonable evidence and arguments for the God of Scripture.

Now, back to the questions that I raised when I started this morning.

- Is Christianity something that people just made up to feel better?
- How can we know the Bible provides an accurate account of events?
- Has the Christian message morphed through the centuries?
- If everything has a cause, why doesn't God have a cause?
- What happens to those who never hear about Christ?
- How do we even know God exists at all?

Are you prepared to answer these questions?

Don't feel sheepish if the answer is 'no,' because it is probably 'no' for most of you. But don't stay in that spot. It's one thing to say, "I don't know" when someone asks a question, and it's one thing not to become a part of



conversation when you know you couldn't get very far in it. But it's a whole other thing to stay in that spot year after year after year. Now, you might ask where do I get answers to questions like these? Well, I have the answer for you, or at least a place for you to start. For the last several weeks you have heard about the "Why God" Conference coming up this Friday night and Saturday. It is a conference that is put on by myself along with six well-studied members of BridgePoint. In this conference, we will investigate the question of God's existence. We will talk about the historicity of Scripture. We will discuss the problem of evil and suffering. We will address what makes Christianity a worthy pursuit among the world's religions. We will talk about myths about Christianity and how they match up with the facts. You will hear some excellent presentations. You will have a chance to ask some questions. And you will be guided to additional resources. We want to help equip you with reasonable answers for people's reasonable questions.

I want to end by giving you a bit of a vision. It's a vision that I think is in keeping with our location in the Energy Corridor. People who live and work around the Energy Corridor are pretty well educated. In their professional life and in their personal life, they don't make willy-nilly decisions. Whether it has to do with drilling a new well or deciding where to send their children to school, they gather information and make an informed decision. Well, my vision is this that BridgePoint would increasingly become a place where people can make an informed decision about Jesus Christ. That we would become a church that is known as being a place where people can ask good questions and in response get good answers. I am not so sure we can afford to do anything less. It's what God himself is willing to do and it's what the very culture in which we live is calling for.

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Scripture quoted from The NET Bible, 2005 by Biblical Studies Press unless otherwise noted.