

Why I Am Not An Agnostic

IMPORTANT: This lesson is the seventh part of an ongoing “chapter” on why I am not an agnostic. The earlier lessons are available in written, video, or podcast form at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. Those earlier lessons contain important information on different kinds of evidence, different kinds of arguments, as well as the paradigm used for analyzing the issues. That information is not repeated here, so those who are new to this series may want to go back and consider those lessons when evaluating my thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

I like things I can see, touch, taste, hear, and smell. These are the things I know are real.

But none of these are God. I can't use my five senses to experience God. No touching, no seeing, no smelling. Does this mean God is not real?

Of course not. There is much that is real that we can't see or touch. Often we have to go by the evidence of reality. There are many ideas we can't see, but we see evidence of them. What does gravity look like? How does it smell? We know it exists as part of the physical universe, and we can see evidence of it when we drop something, but we sure can't hear it!

Our son Will introduced me to the philosophical debate about unknowable truths. There are things we don't know, things we cannot know, that are nonetheless true. An example that sticks out in my mind is whether there is an even or odd number of stars. We cannot count them to know. It is not some piece of data we will be able to ascertain. One of the answers (odd or even) must be true, but which one is true is unknowable.

As people think on these issues, it is not surprising that the inability to see God, or to touch God, is one that surfaces in discussions. After all, wouldn't it be nice to have no need for “faith,” but rather have everyone know of God simply by their own experiences?

We continue to look at evidences for and against God, focusing on issues that arise from our failure to know of his presence. Having already gone through typical arguments for God, we now address four negative perceptions or arguments used against the idea of God. These are points two and three from our chart on those arguments

2. Why can't we see God?

Many people, especially on the Internet, use as their proof there is no God the fact that they cannot see him. This “proof” is often couched in terms like, “If there is a God, I am glad

to believe in him; all he need do is appear to me!” This proposition seems to appeal to a certain group of atheists and agnostics, while other atheists and agnostics do not ascribe to it.

I have tried to carefully consider this argument and readily state that I do not find this persuasive. It is premised, at least in part, on the idea that God would behave as I would if I were God. Of course, I am no God, and it seems a bit narcissistic to think that God should or would be what I want him to be. Heavens, I can’t even make people be what or who I want them to be!

This perspective seems to have taken the Biblical story of creation and turned it on its head. Instead of God making humanity in his image, this is humanity trying to make a God in our image. If God is *not* a visible being, then God is not a visible being. No one wishing otherwise is going to change that.

The Judeo-Christian God stands out as different than the other neighboring religions of the day. The other perceived gods of ancient times were somewhat visible. In the Greek world, you would find Poseidon in the ocean. The Vikings found Thor in the thunder. Israel’s neighbors in Mesopotamia found Ba’al in storms. The Egyptians found Ra in the sun. The peoples were also able to make images of their gods, and many of these “idols” can be seen in museums and are still being found by archeologists today.

Not so with Israel. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures uniquely note that God is not a visible God. Humanity has no concept of what God “looks like” and was prohibited from making any image of God. This must have seemed the most bizarre of “The Ten Commandments.”

Recorded in Exodus 20:3-4, we read God’s clear instruction that,

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

This was out of place with every other culture around Israel. It did not even occur to Moses that God was one who couldn’t be seen. After God had led the Israelites out from Pharaoh’s control, while Moses was on the mountain receiving God’s instructions for the people, Moses asked God to show himself. Moses wanted to see God.

God told Moses that Moses would see God’s glory. Moses would see where God has been, but Moses could not see God’s face. God explained, “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:20).

While this was unlike any other contemporary religion, this revelation about God makes sense in light of what we know about the universe today. We believe that there are

100,000,000,000,000,000,000 (100 sextillion or 10^{23}) stars in the universe. Like our sun, each of those stars have their own gravitational pull with their own cosmic bodies captured in the field. If we could travel in the universe at the speed of light, it would take us 93 billion years to go from one end to the other. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures teach that those stars are each named by God (Ps. 147:4), and God spread the whole universe with his hand (Is. 48:13). This same God knows the thoughts of each of the 8 billion people alive today.

God is so great and grand, that many reading this description would find such a God inconceivable. He is much too large for the human mind to even conceive. His power, insight, and role in this world seems too great for even the smartest of our 3-pound brains.

Yet it is exactly that reality that makes it sensible that such a God isn't going to be seen by you and me. God isn't Thor walking in the thunder and occasionally displaying his hammering in the storms that rock the land and sea. God is far more than a storm, more than a planet, a solar system, more than even the universe.

The Judeo-Christian God who created this universe is far beyond what any eye could behold. It seems almost ludicrous to think that one could see God, much less that such a God would make personal visits to the 8 billion people on the planet, answering their questions, and convincing them he really is such a God.

Of course, here we see one of the dynamics of the Christian faith. Christianity teaches that such a God did, in a sense, become visible once for all mankind to see or know about. The Christian teaching is that God miraculously became incarnated into a human form in the person of Jesus. Christian orthodoxy teaches that Jesus was fully God and also fully human.

Of course, the idea that there would be an incarnation, I find easy to accept. Similarly, the idea that it would happen in a miraculous fashion (a virgin birth) is not out of the question and something extraordinary would almost be expected, if there was such a God doing such a thing as becoming human. What I would find nonsense, or at least hard to expect, is that any such huge God as taught in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures could exist truly as a human.

The amazing thing about the Christian explanation in its earliest writings sets aside such concerns, even though the concerns haven't really come into mind until the explosion of knowledge post-renaissance. In a way that would seem "too convenient" as an explanation if it came today, the underlying issues of concern were dealt with in Christian Scriptures long ago. It involves a discussion of what it means for Jesus to be "fully God."

The Christian Scriptures teach that Jesus was God's Son, and was the Divine One, but Scripture also teaches that in becoming human, God set aside aspects of his "God-ness." The Jewish rabbi and Christian apostle Paul wrote about this to a group of Christians in Philippi (modern Greece). Paul explained that Jesus,

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself*, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:6-7).

Even Jesus explained to his followers that, as knowledgeable and powerful as he was, there were things even he did not know. When speaking of the end of days, Jesus noted that the knowledge was possessed by God alone, not angels nor himself as Jesus Christ, Son of God. (Matt. 24:36).

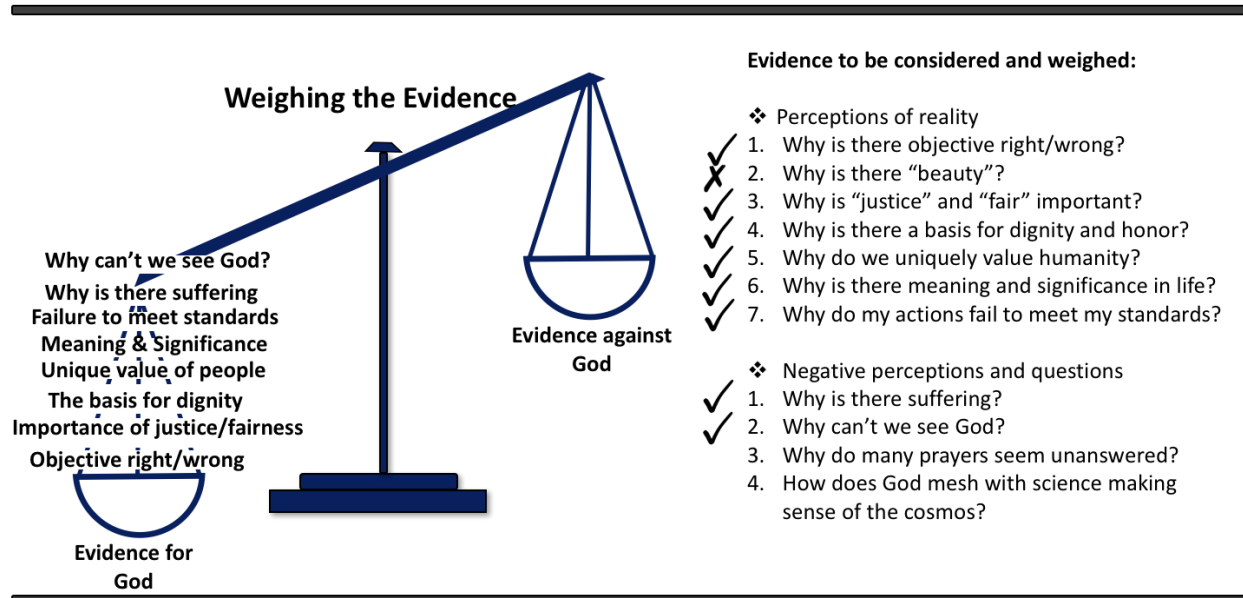
As we might suspect, God becoming man, even setting aside his God-ness, did not mean that Jesus was any ordinary human. The Christian Scriptures proclaim that Jesus did great miracles, healing the sick, raising the dead, multiplying fish and bread to feed thousands, changing water into wine, and more. These miracles are not anything we can see or verify today. But in their day, they were strong enough to convince so many people that within two decades of the life of Christ, belief in him as the Son of God had spread throughout much of the Roman world. Ultimately many, including the closest followers of Jesus, would die as martyrs rather than recant their confidence in who he was and what he did.

So as I consider the God proclaimed in the Bible, and as I consider what kind of God it would take to be over all the universe, I don't find it bizarre that we don't see him in a physical form. God is beyond this universe and its physical features. I am not shocked I don't see him. My shock is that such a grand God would care for people, or even pay us any attention. I am not alone in this amazement. The writer of Psalm 8 was also stunned, exclaiming,

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps. 8:1, 3, 4)

This is the thrust of Jesus as God incarnate. We have a visible incarnation of God that was so powerful, compelling, and genuine that people readily gave their lives rather than deny the veracity of what they saw and experienced. This is especially true concerning the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the ultimate proof that he was God, not simply a good guy. Jesus did this, according to his teaching and that of his followers, because of his love and concern for humanity. God cares for us because he made us in his image to be in a relationship with him. He worked to restore the relationship destroyed by sin.

To me, the visibility issue is not one that weighs in favor of "No God." It actually is consistent with the views of the Judeo-Christian God.



3. Why do so many prayers seem unanswered?

So if there is a God, and if he cares for humanity, why is it that so many prayers of people go unanswered? Of course, we might excuse the unanswered prayer of the child who prays for an immediate ice cream cone, or maybe for the blizzard to cancel school. But what about the victim of inoperable cancer? What about the child who is being molested? Why doesn't God answer those prayers?

Prayer is an interesting matter that gets rather personal. I am not sure if we have reasonably thought it through, when we use it as an argument for or against God. Let me give some illustrations before we analyze the argument.

When I was a young boy, age 11, I was going to bed on a Friday night, planning to get up early the next morning for a baseball game. It was an important game for our team, and was played in a big field, complete with a scoreboard just over the centerfield fence. I prayed that night that I would hit a homerun the next day. Sure enough, in my first at bat, I hit one that sailed over the centerfield fence.

Look at the possibilities: Did God answer that prayer? Or did I get lucky? Maybe my prayer had infiltrated my subconscious mind and even though there is no God, I had the confidence to swing mightily and accurately. In faith, I can say, "God answered my prayer," but to use that as a basis for the faith, seems tenuous at best. Similarly, there were times I prayed to hit a homerun and I struck out. Did God answer the prayer, "No!"? Or was I unlucky? Did my prayer not adequately infuse my subconscious mind such that I was successful? Again, this seems tenuous to use as an argument for or against God.

Take this example to another scale. After a college football game, I was listening to the post-game show on the radio. One of the players from the victorious team was explaining, “I knew we would win. We prayed to win.” Now I think we can safely assume that both sides had players, coaches or at least fans, praying that each side would win. How can we build a faith or a lack of faith based upon those results? I don’t think we can.

We can better answer the question, “If there is a God, why are so many prayers unanswered?” by looking at this practically. There are certain questions that need answers, and structuring a discussion around those questions helps me make sense of this issue.

What is the purpose of prayer? How should we pray? Are there limits to prayer?

What is the purpose of prayer?

The purpose from a human perspective might be as simple as, “I want something that I can’t get on my own.” The purpose from God’s perspective might be something different.

If we know much about humanity, we know that our tendency is to make the world about us. We want what we want. Our needs are important. Our priorities matter. Yet that inherent narcissism does not necessarily reflect reality. The Judeo-Christian view of reality is quite different. The big concern is not, “Am I going to be happy today?” There are much bigger concerns.

As noted earlier, the Judeo-Christian teaching is that we live in a war zone. There is a cosmic conflict in which we play a role. God has put humanity on this earth with the plan that, working in concert and relationship with God, humanity can “tend to the garden,” or take care of each other and this planet. This should affect how we treat people, animals, and the environment.

Since the fall of Adam and Eve, also explained earlier, humanity has a greater challenge in overcoming in this conflict. A paramount issue becomes restoring the relationship with God, something made possible through the actions of God in Jesus. This can bring people back into relationship with God, and it infuses people with heightened insight and power to do certain things, but it doesn’t suddenly make the world and our mission one of happiness to the greatest number of people.

The Christian teaching is that those who follow God are to live their lives seeking what will best promote God’s kingdom, best ensure that things bring glory to his name, and best fight against the foes that are set against him. That might mean a healing of cancer will help. It might also mean that a cancer leading to my death would help. I don’t know. I am not God. But Christian prayer in this life is not about my will, it’s not about my comfort or feelings, it’s not about me or you. Christian prayer is about God’s will.

Under Christian thought, does God's will not take into account how I feel? Of course it does. God cares for his followers as a parent does his or her child. But there are matters that are of greater importance in life than how I feel. My parents were marvelous parents. As I grew up, there were times where I got the bicycle I wanted. But there were also times where I didn't. Moreover, there were times when things were not at *all* what I wanted. There were times my feelings were trumped by greater needs, sometimes even my own needs to grow up, to learn responsibility, and to do what needed to be done, whether I wanted to or not.

Under Christian teaching, so it is with God. Our prayers are important, but the prayers fill a role. We are seeking God's will in this world, and praying that into reality. In an allegorical way, we are "tending to the garden," but praying for God's help in doing so. This leads to the next question.

How should we pray?

It makes sense that we should not be indicting God over not answering prayer unless we are certain that we are praying as we should. Certainly the purpose of prayer, as set out above, must inform us in how we should pray.

Jesus taught his followers a good deal about prayer. He told his followers to pray together. He told them their prayers would be answered. But he told them this in conjunction with teaching them *how to pray*. Here the "how" becomes extremely important.

After Jesus had finished praying, his followers came up to him and asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk. 11:1). Jesus did so. The more common version we use of Jesus teaching prayer is recorded in Matthew chapter 6. It is called "The Lord's Prayer" and it teaches us how the believer is to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

That prayer is vastly different from "Give me a bicycle!" We see in that prayer that the greater matter is not about me. The first thing in the prayer is for God's name to be "hallowed." The idea behind "name" is reputation. The "hallowing" means holding it in regard, seeing it as special and unique. We are to pray that God's reputation and essences as understood and seen in this world will be uniquely honored and valued.

From there the prayer seeks God's kingdom, not our own. We are actually praying for God's kingdom to expand and grow, for people to move into faith. As a Christian believer, my prayer would include that this book would assist others and bring growth to his

kingdom. I write my experiences and thoughts, with people in mind that may not yet embrace the truth of what I believe to be reality. My prayer is that this would happen in the mind and heart of each one reading it.

The third concern in the prayer centers on the importance of seeking God's will. I would a number of things in my life, but the real thing I should seek is God's will. I want to be well, but if through my sickness I or others will grow in faith, then let me be sick! If my death will help others find the way, if it will work better in God's kingdom for me to meet death today instead of tomorrow, then Lord, take me today!

Only after praying for God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will, do we pray for our own needs. Even those needs, however, are instructive. Jesus taught us to pray for what we *need* today. Of course, there are differences in what I need and what I want. I don't see Jesus teaching his disciples that prayer is a birthday wish list. It is for the good of God and our needs. The second personalized request is for forgiveness of sins, but with a twist. We are also to pray and recognize our own need to forgive others. The final plea in prayer is for God to help us walk right and holy before him, delivering us from temptation and evil.

This approach to prayer is very different from one where God is our concierge getting us seats in the restaurant that are otherwise hard to get. God is no bell hop hauling our luggage to our room. God is God. This world and our lives are serious. There is suffering, there are enemies, and sin runs rampant. We are to be praying against those things as we pray for God's will.

These are prayers God answers. This brings us to ask the final question:

Are there limits to prayer?

If we are arguing for prayer to be our litmus test on whether there is a God, we must be thinking there are no limits to prayer. However, the Judeo-Christian teaching is that prayer is very limited. It is limited by God's will and by what best achieves God's purposes. Again, while humanity is very special in the Judeo-Christian worldview, people are not the be-all or end-all. People have a role to fill in God's creation pursuant to God's instructions and plans. So it is not surprising to see, even in the Bible, numerous times prayers are not answered "yes," but are answered "no."

Several examples should suffice. The Jewish rabbi and Christian missionary Paul was able to perform great miracles on the road. He healed the sick, cast out demons, and even raised the dead once. Yet there was an infirmity that afflicted Paul personally that he prayed to go away three times. The unnamed infirmity remained. Paul explained to some of his Christian friends, that his "thorn in the flesh" was there at least in part to keep him from becoming "conceited" over the many accomplishments and honors he had from God.

Paul's prayer to remove the thorn was not answered "Yes," but instead Paul was taught that in his weakness, he would find the strength of God (See account in 2 Cor. 12).

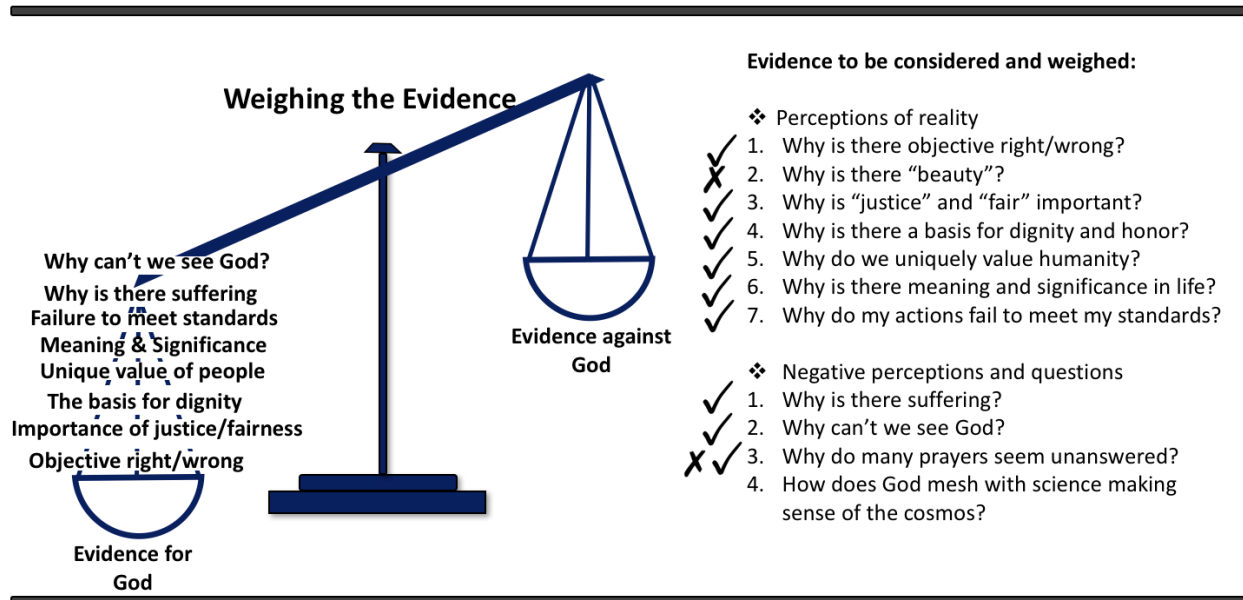
King David, the greatest Hebrew king, had an infant son from an adulterous relationship. The son was born terminally sick. David prayed for healing day and night. David fasted. The son died.

Even Jesus himself prayed before his arrest, knowing what was coming. Jesus asked God that the ordeal might pass, praying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me," but the prayer didn't end there. Jesus then added, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Lk 22:42).

The Judeo-Christian position is not one of a genie God who is required to grant us our wishes. That comes in the movies. Prayer is not a magic formula that binds God to answer as we want. Prayer is a way of aligning our desires with the will of God. Prayer invokes and works God's plans on earth, so that humanity is able to fulfill and walk in God's will. It is not all about us. It is all about him.

In that sense, the idea that God doesn't answer all prayer is not indicative to me that there is no God. I would agree there is no genie, but common sense dictates that God couldn't be bound by such simple expectations. That would change sports quite a bit if God ensured victory by the team with the most prayers.

I see prayer, both answered and unanswered, as consistent with the worldview of the Judeo-Christian God. It seems to me that it could also be consistent with there being no God. It could be luck, save for the fact that occasionally a prayer is answered in a miraculous fashion. That would sway those who experience the miracle, but not the cynic. Accordingly, I leave answered or unanswered prayer off the scales for others, but I include it on the scales for me.



Next week we will conclude this with our final piece of evidence:

4. How does God mesh with science making sense of the cosmos?

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything"* (Ex. 20:3-4).

We like things that are familiar to us. Things that aren't familiar we often find frightening. So most everything we try to understand in light of what we know, what is ordinary or normal. This doesn't work with God. God is not something we make up. He is not one who is what we want him to be. God exists on his own. He is who he is. Our job, my job, is to learn of him, to get to know him, and to give my life to him. This is difficult, challenging, and takes a lifetime. But it is a good and noble pursuit that changes everything. I am going to learn more of God.

Lord, open our eyes and soften our hearts, that we might see you, watch you move in our lives, and, give you the glory and honor due your name.

2. *"Pray then like this... Your will be done"* (Mt. 6:9-10).

I want to pray. I need to pray. But I need to grow up and work to ensure I am praying for God's will, not my own. This can be massively challenging.

3. *“David said to his servants, “Is the child dead?” They said, “He is dead.” Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped”* (2 Sam. 12:19-20).

For days David had been praying and fasting for the life of his newborn son. He wore out his knees seeking God's intervention. The baby still died. Afterwards, David's servants were afraid to tell him the child was dead. They feared how David might react. When David heard the whispering, and flushed the truth out of them, his reaction was unexpected and inspirational. David got up, washed up, and went to the temple to worship the Lord. David knew that while the child was alive, God might answer the prayer. But once the child was dead, David understood that he would one day join the child, but the child would no longer be joining David on this earth.

This moves me. I pray for a lot of things and people. Many of my prayers are answered; many are not. I need to always walk in faith, worshiping the Lord regardless of the answers. I need to acknowledge that he is God, I am not, and I live for his will.