

Morality, Religion, Faith, Evidence

Where Do We Find the Truth?

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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Is Anything Absolutely Wrong?

To launch us on our discussion this evening, I would like first to read a passage from the New Testament. It comes from the letter to the Romans.

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practise the very same things. We know that the judgement of God rightly falls on those who practise such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practise such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgement of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed.

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (2:1–16)

This is written by the Christian apostle Paul to his Christian friends in Rome. There had been a church in Rome now for a few years, begun by those who heard the gospel preached on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. They had been converted to faith in Christ, and had taken the gospel back to the capital city of the empire. As we know, Paul had never been there, but he writes to them hoping eventually to visit them.

Our moral sense

Tonight I want to discuss with you something that I believe you experience in common with every man and woman on the globe; I want to talk to you about our inner sense of right and wrong, what we call our moral sense. We all have it, of course. Suppose a friend of yours treats you shabbily, and when he comes to you, you say, 'Look here, what you've done is not fair,' he will probably reply, 'it is fair,' and he'll try to convince you that what he's done is fair.

But if he were to reply to you, 'Fair? What do you mean by the term "fair"? I don't know what you mean,' you would think it very odd, for that sense of fairness is built into us almost from babyhood. Here are two infants playing, one is four and one is six, and the six-year-old steals the toy from four-year-old. There is a bit of an argument, and just as Mum comes in to see what the row is about, four-year-old is delivering a powerful slap on the face of his six-year-old brother. Mother's favourite is the six-year-old, so she's not going to stand for this, and she snatches the toy away and delivers four-year-old a harangue. And, who knows, contrary to the government, she might even give him a slap.

When mother leaves the room, the four-year-old, through his tears, is heard to say, 'It isn't fair, he started it.' That's interesting, isn't it? Where did the four-year-old get the idea that this world is going to be fair? I'm going to suggest to you that it is an in-built thing, like the ability to learn and speak a language.

When we come to more serious things, suppose you discover a friend of yours has lied to you. The next time you meet her, you would give her, 'a piece of your mind'. 'You've lied to me,' you'd say. We feel very resentful at being treated like that. Of course, your friend will reply that it wasn't really a lie, and this, that and the other. But what would you say if your friend replied, 'Yes, of course I lied, I always lie'? You would say, 'That's utterly perverse, because if everybody lied, nobody would trust anybody.'

It is the fact that, because people normally tell the truth, liars are able to get advantage for the time being. And when we find we've been lied against, we can feel very resentful. This moral sense within us isn't just a matter of taste, is it? You know, I like beans, you don't like beans; I like yoghurt, you don't like yoghurt. But this inner moral sense that is built into our hearts is not a matter of taste. When we sense that that has been offended, we get indignant.

Then there's another side to it. We not only *accuse* people, but from time to time we *excuse* them, don't we? A television company was running a series of phone-in competitions, and you had to pay so much. They were making a lot of money out of it. People phoned in to answer questions and thought they were going to get a prize. Now it's come to light that the whole thing's been stitched up. The television company itself had already decided it, closed the offers down, and made out that people had applied and had already won, when they hadn't. The thing was a lie. But then came the excuses. The people in charge of the programme had to keep their jobs and they had to keep the numbers up to make money out of it.

So, we not only accuse, but sometimes we excuse. Why do we excuse? If there were no moral law, no standards, you wouldn't need to excuse anybody. There would be nothing to be excused for. I suggest to you now that it is because in our hearts there is this basic moral

sense of right and wrong that leads us to protest when other people do wrong; and very often try and excuse ourselves when we do wrong.

Where does that moral sense come from?

The passage of the Bible that we have just read says that moral sense is built into human beings by our Creator, and the very fact that we accuse others, or excuse them, is evidence before God that when we do wrong and others do wrong, we are able to recognize that it is wrong, and admit that it is wrong. So, when eventually God holds us to account, we shall have been witnesses against ourselves that we have knowingly done wrong.

The old Greek philosopher, Socrates, developed a notion in his head that nobody ever does wrong willingly and knowingly. He thought that people did wrong because they thought that they benefited from doing wrong, and therefore it was a good thing to do. He said they didn't realize that anybody who does wrong to somebody else does damage to himself. So he concluded that nobody knowingly does wrong, and the cure for wrongdoing is to educate people into what is right. When the later philosopher, the great Aristotle, considered it, he said, 'No, that's not right. All of us do wrong sometimes, knowing that it is wrong.'

I put it to you: have you ever done or do you ever do anything, knowing that it is wrong? I should have to confess, I have. This passage that we have read tells us that this moral sense has been given to us by God. There are, therefore, certain things that we know to be wrong, and things we cannot not know to be wrong.

Let's cite a few, shall we?

Let's think of the incident that Dostoevsky records in one of his novels of a Russian soldier. A little baby was held up in front of him, and he pointed his rifle at it. The little baby cooed and smiled, as babies will, and just as the baby was smiling he pulled the trigger and shot the child's brains out. We don't have to be told that's wrong.

Lying before a judge when somebody's on trial, not telling the truth but lying; we don't have to be told that's wrong. And if we ourselves were on trial and somebody tried to bribe the judge to bring in a verdict favouring the other party, we could see that was wrong at once.

Similarly, stealing is wrong. There is no nation on earth where stealing is taken as okay. Stealing somebody else's wife is wrong. Treating the name of God lightly is wrong, although the BBC Radio 4 comedies constantly do it, don't they? We know it's wrong because God has put the law in our hearts.

There is a very interesting book by Professor Budziszewski, with the interesting title *What We Can't Not Know*. He is pressing home what the Bible says here, that we have the law of God written on our hearts, we know certain things are wrong and we will say whatever we can to cover it up. The passage that we have read is very serious, because it tells us that one day God will judge the secrets of men at his final judgment. When that happens, we shall be without excuse, for we will have laid the evidence against ourselves.

God has the records. If a man appears before that judgment and God says, 'You did such and such, and you knew it was wrong,' and the man tries to say he didn't know it was wrong, God will play back the man's inner thoughts and show him where, knowing it was

wrong, he made the choice and he did it. The New Testament says that every time we knowingly do something wrong, it's like signing an admission of guilt with our own hand.

You know how it used to be in Tesco or anywhere else before you had PIN numbers? When you gave them the card you had to sign a bit of paper with your own hand. Using that metaphor, God says that the decisions we have made are our own signature on what we have done, and God will bring it into his judgment (1 Cor 14:25; Heb 4:13).

I don't know how it affects you, but I know a tremendous lot of people who would almost laugh at me when I say that. They don't believe that stuff anymore. They don't believe in God anyway, so all this talk of a final judgment is antiquated superstition. There is no God.

Well, where do we get these moral laws from that we find in our hearts?

'We get them from our parents, or from our teachers at school,' they say. 'They are simply the authorities, and when we grow up we can neglect those authorities if we want to. There's nothing more in it than that.'

Wait a moment. Let me ask you how you learned mathematics. You went to school and they taught you by one means or other $2+2=4$, isn't that so? At first you agreed because the teachers said so, and you were suitably rewarded if you got the sum right. You believed it because the teachers said so.

But that phase soon passed, didn't it? Why do you believe now that $2+2=4$? Is it because the teachers said so?

'Of course not,' you say.

Well, why?

'I saw it for myself,' you say.

Yes, indeed you did, for we're dealing with the laws of mathematics. At first we got them through the teacher, or parents, or somebody, but then we came to see that the teacher didn't invent the laws; the laws of mathematics exist. If you ask an eighteen-year-old, 'What is the square root of nine?', he won't say, 'four and a half,' he'll say, 'three'. If you ask, 'How do you know?', he won't reply, 'because teacher told me,' he'll say, 'it's obvious—can't you see it?'

The laws of mathematics are not invented by parents or teachers. The famous Oxford mathematician, Sir Roger Penrose, who did the mathematics on black holes, says openly that he believes mathematicians don't invent those laws; they discover them. Those laws belong to the way the Creator has made our universe. So, it's no excuse to say that these laws were taught us by our parents or schoolteachers; mathematical laws are written into the whole universe by its Creator. And so it is with these moral laws.

All right, so you don't believe there's a God. Have you really thought through what that implies about human behaviour? If you don't believe in God, what is our position in this world and in this universe? Let me cite one example of a famous atheist who spends an enormous amount of energy these days trying to tell the world there is no God, expressing his disgust against everybody who dares to believe there is one.

Listen to Professor Richard Dawkins of Oxford, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science. He says that human beings are controlled by their DNA. In a world run by DNA, some people are going to get lucky, some people are going to be very unlucky, and there's

no explaining it or accounting for it; that's just how things are. DNA does not care tuppence about anybody. There's no rhyme nor reason in it; DNA does not care.

Do you feel that's right? If we get rid of God, the author and authority behind moral law, what are the implications of it?

But I must be fair to Richard Dawkins. Elsewhere he writes that men and woman are nothing more than our genes—we're nothing but genes. If that's so, our genes make us do some very funny things sometimes, don't they? Hitler's genes made him do some very awful things.

'What about that, then?', we ask him.

He says, 'We have to learn to rebel against our genes.'

But if I'm nothing but genes, what part of me is then left that could rebel against the genes, when every part of me is made by the genes? What illogical nonsense some people speak, don't they?

Can we be good without God?

Then perhaps you'll say, 'That's an extreme example. Other people are not extreme in that sense, and surely we can be good without God. We don't have to believe in God.'

How would that be, then?

'Well,' you say, 'life in society is like a game. When you're going to play a game of football, you meet together with everybody and you decide what the rules are, and as long as everybody keeps the rules the game goes on very nicely. So it's the society that has made the rules, they don't come down from God—not the rules of football anyway. If society decides in the end to change the rules, they're perfectly free to change the rules. And if you decide you don't want to play football, you want to play rugby, well then you change the rules again. It's society that makes up the rules; they don't come from God, and we can be good and behave well without God.'

It is the fact that agreement amongst people in societies has yielded us a lot of benefits. If people are able to come together and decide what the rules should be, we shall enjoy comparative peace and prosperity. But it is not the final answer. Suppose the society in question turned out to be Hitler's, and what he did to Germany. Was that okay because the vast majority of Germans went along with him? When it comes to the basic value of life, what is a human life worth? Who decides it? It wouldn't be so good if Stalin had decided it, for in pursuance of his political theories he murdered millions. The plea that we can be good without God because we can rely on society, is an excuse that wears very, very thin after the experiences of the last century.

What about justice?

But let me take it to the extreme. If there's no *God*, let me suggest to you a little thought experiment. I want you, in your mind, to think that you and I are going to visit the people in Hitler's concentration camps. It will be a terrible experience. As we arrive, with what little strength they've got left, the people are trying to say to us, 'We want justice. What are you doing for us?'

What would you say to them? I should have say, 'I'm sorry, I wish there was something I could do for you, but I cannot, and you're not going to get justice. You'll soon be dead but, my dear friend, there is a God in heaven, a God who cares for justice, and this life is not the end. There is to be a final judgment when God will put right earth's wrongs, and in light of that let me tell you that God's own Son visited earth and died for you, so that you might be forgiven of your personal sins and enjoy heaven with God eternally.'

Ah, but you're an atheist; you don't believe there's a God. All right, you come and talk to the people, then. What will you say?

'You're not going to get justice in this life.'

And they say, 'That's terrible. We were brought up to think that the world is just, and justice was real.'

So you say, 'Well, you'd better grow up. You're not going to get justice in this world. All your hopes of justice in this world are like a rope of sand.'

And then you'll have to add, 'This life ends everything, so you're not going to get justice in this life, nor in the life to come.' You don't believe there's a life to come and the multi-millions that have suffered injustice in the world's history are utterly without hope. Is that what you really believe?

Postmodernism and tolerance

There's a recent fashion that is taught in our schools, not so much in science departments, but in the departments of English and literature. The technical name for it is *postmodernism*. If your children are taught literature in school, they are liable to be taught postmodernist attitudes. What it means is this. Take any book: there is no correct interpretation of it. There could be one thousand different interpretations. If you have an interpretation, that's all right for you. If I have a different interpretation, absolutely the opposite of yours, postmodernism says that's all right too, for there is no ultimate truth, no ultimate justice.

That's what your children are being taught nowadays in many an English department, and you can imagine at once the effect it has on some of them. If you were to take a Bible to them, and say, 'See what the Bible says,' they will reply, 'But that's your opinion. I hold a different opinion. You mustn't say I'm wrong, and I won't say you're wrong. We've all got to be tolerant of people and we mustn't say anybody else is wrong.'

About three years ago a friend brought a young man to see me. In his teens he had professed to be a Christian and in fact had gone out on Christian missionary work. After that he'd gone to Oxford and read philosophy. When he came to see me, he told me he believed nothing.

He said, 'All values are socially determined—we get our values from what our society decides. We accept that something is good because our society says it's good. If another society says it's bad, well that's their view. You can't say they're wrong, and they can't say you're wrong.'

So I said, 'All values are determined by your society, and you mustn't say that any of them are wrong?'

'That's how it is,' he says.

I said, 'Well, what about cannibalism, then? If you go to one of these countries and they practise cannibalism, what would you say about that?'

'That's perfectly okay,' said he.

So, if another country has murder, it's okay, is it?

That is being taught in the name of tolerance. You must be tolerant; you mustn't say anybody is wrong. It's a funny doctrine, isn't it? And when they talk to me like that, I quote them Pol Pot of Cambodia. He was a man who didn't like intellectuals, and he thought that anybody who wore a pair of glasses was an intellectual, so he eliminated the lot. Nearly a million people eliminated because he didn't like them.

So now I ask the postmodernist, 'I suppose I mustn't say Pol Pot was wrong? He was vastly intolerant, but for him I must say that it was okay. I must be tolerant; I mustn't be intolerant and I mustn't say anybody is wrong.'

But that's nonsense.

I have observed that those who preach postmodernism of that sort don't always live it out. If one of them goes down to the bank and puts ten thousand pounds into his savings account, he expects it to be in his account, according to the normal laws of arithmetic and business ethics. But the bank manager comes out, and says, 'According to your way of accounting, you should have ten thousand pounds, but we have a different form of accounting and business principles, and actually according to our system you not only don't have the ten thousand pounds, but you're in our debt for services to another fifteen hundred pounds!'

Do you think the postmodernist will say, 'Oh, you have a different system of accountancy? Well, okay, I shan't be intolerant and say, "You're wrong."' Is that what he says? No, of course he doesn't. He doesn't live out in daily life what he professes when it comes to general morality.

Does life have purpose?

Why do people get convinced by such theories? One of the reasons is surely that the alternative for many is scary. They feel it is tyrannical. If there is a God, and he has put the moral judgment into our hearts, and if he's going to call us before him to give account, then of course it makes people feel uncomfortable, to say the least. They hope it is not so.

In my professional life I used to teach Classics: the ancient Greek philosophers, and particularly the natural philosophers. I have every admiration for them. They were the first people in Europe to ask how this universe is made, and how it works. Three or four hundred years before Christ some of them invented the atomic theory. That was some going. By sheer power of thought, they discerned that this universe is made up of atoms so small that you can't cut them, so they thought. Well, of course, the atomic theory has moved on since then and we know that atoms can be split. But that original idea, dating back to three or four centuries BC, was brilliant as a physical theory.

Later on there was a Roman poet, whose name was Lucretius. He came across this theory as it was interpreted by a Greek philosopher called Epicurus. Epicurus's idea was

that the main purpose of life is pleasure. That appealed to Lucretius, as it appeals to many people.

Do you have a main purpose in life—a really main purpose? What are you aiming at? When the Greeks thought about these things, they said that if you're going to have a real main purpose in life, it must be an end in itself, and not merely a means to another end.

You say, 'What on earth do you mean by that?'

Well, let me illustrate it. You've got to work very hard at your job. What for?

'I need the salary', you say.

'Oh really? Why do you need the salary?'

'Well, I've got some teenagers growing up, and I want to educate them. That's why I need the money. I want them to go eventually to university and get a degree.'

'Whatever for?'

'Well, so that they can get a good job, and get a lot of money.'

'What for?'

'Well, they'll need a house, and they're going to get married and have children, and they'll want to send their children to university.'

'I see, to get money and a good job, so that they can have children and pay for them to go to university so that they can get a good job, and earn a lot of money!'

Wait a minute, we're going round in circles, aren't we?

So the Greeks said that, to be satisfied, a goal in life has to be an end in itself, not sought for other purposes. Epicurus said that the end to be aimed at in life was pleasure. Would that be yours—the sole end in life is pleasure? Even the more thoughtful Greeks despised it. Keep well, my good sir, but you're liable to find a lot of pain and unpleasantness as life goes on. Is that all pleasure?

If I gave you the chance, I think some of you would say, 'My supreme purpose in life is to know, to serve, and to enjoy God, my Creator.'

But to come back to Lucretius, the Roman poet: he liked this atomic theory, the notion that the main thing in life was pleasure, and he tells us why he particularly liked it. 'You see,' said he, 'it teaches us that when a man dies the atoms of his body and soul come adrift, and that's the end of him. There is no life after death; there is no judgment.' That's why he liked the theory.

But there is going to be a judgment, and that is where the Christian gospel is so relevant to people who are struggling with life. We have done wrong, and knowingly done wrong, and the sense that if there is a God he will call us one day to judgment sometimes makes people wish that there was no God, and life ends everything.

The gospel's answer

Listen to the gospel and its tremendous relevance that lets us face the realities of life, our sin and guilt, and fear of the future. It says that it is appointed to men to die once, and after that comes the judgment, an appointment that cannot be missed (see Heb 9:27). But then it says that Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many (v. 28). This marvellous gospel confronts us human beings in our moral struggles and predicaments. It doesn't say that sin doesn't matter and you can forget it. It says that sin matters so much that God in his mercy gave his

own dear Son to bear and suffer and pay the penalty of our human sin and its judgment. God may be seen to be just, as he simultaneously pardons us through what Christ has done. That's a glorious gospel, isn't it?

Startling though it was, the Lord Jesus said to his contemporaries, 'God the Father doesn't judge anybody, he has committed all judgment to the Son—to me. I am the judge' (see John 5:22). If ever we stand before God's ultimate throne at the final judgment, the judge will be Christ, the one who died at Calvary. Listen to what the judge says to those who now, in true repentance and faith, receive him as their Saviour: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (v. 24). The gift of forgiveness, acceptance, peace with God, and eternal security are given to us through Christ.

What would you say, if you could be assured that you knew what the verdict was going to be on your life on the day of judgment?

'Nobody can be sure of that,' you say.

Well, you can, because the judge himself is present this very moment, unseen of course, in this very room. He says to each one of us, 'I'm going to be the judge and here are my terms. I died for you; I bore the penalty of sin and of the broken law, the penalty that should have been yours. But God so loved his world that he gave me, his only Son, to die at Calvary, to pay that penalty, so that all who trust me may be forgiven and have eternal life, and the assurance they will never come into judgment.'

You say, 'How can I be sure?'

You can be sure by receiving and believing the one who's going to be the judge. You see, there's no appeal against his judgment, for he is the final judge, and if he says it, it is certain.

You say, 'That sounds too good to be true.'

Well, it depends how you take it. Today, if I come face to face with the judge and repent of my sin, own that I need salvation and put my faith in him, he assures me there's no condemnation. It does not mean, of course, that now I can go and live as I please. When I receive him as Saviour I also receive him as Lord, and now my life takes a new direction. He leads and controls me, and by his grace trains me. If need be he will discipline me so that he might develop within me a way of life that will be pleasing to God.

There is his offer: it is appointed to men to die once, and after that comes the judgment, but Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. For you and me as sinners, our hope, from a God of justice himself, is in the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. We can be justified, put in the clear, forgiven, made right with God and ready for whenever we transfer from this life to eternity.

So, let us put aside all prevarication, all false hopes, and come now to the one who will be the final judge, and be sure that we have been reconciled to him.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, we live in a world that grows more and more bewildered, as modern theories that deny thee are planted and bring forth an ever-increasing harvest in the minds of many people, and in the younger generation in particular.

We therefore pray thy blessing on thy word tonight. To those of us who have already known thee for many years, help us to grasp what the present situation is, so that we might help our younger generation who are struggling with the modern world of unbelief, supposedly built on science, falsely so-called.

And Lord, if any of us are not yet ready to meet thee, and do not have that certainty in our hearts of acceptance with God, we thank thee for the Saviour who stands ready to receive us. We pray that this night all of us without exception may come running to him, and receive from him the gift of eternal life, and forgiveness, and eternal peace with God.

Hear our evening prayers, we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[Do All Religions Lead to God?](#)

Thank you Mr Chairman, sir, for those kindly words of introduction, and welcome, all of you, to tonight's discussion. The topic you have proposed that I discuss with you this evening is *Do all religions lead to God?*, and I shall do my best to stick to your question and answer it as clearly and as fairly as I possibly can.

Let me simply draw your attention to the way you have worded the question. It is 'do all religions lead to God?', and that is the question I shall seek to answer. There is a slightly different question that I shall not be answering. Many people feel that the true purpose of religion has very little to do with the topic of whether there's a God or not. They say it would be better for religion to forget, what they call, 'this transcendental nonsense', and concentrate on the true purpose of religion, which is to help people lead good and moral lives. They contend that, if you do that, all religions are concerned with the same thing.

That is a somewhat different question from the one you have asked me to answer this evening. If you want that one answered, well, with courage in both hands, I suggest you'll have to invite me to come again, and specify exactly what it is you wish me to answer.

So, tonight I shall try to answer your question at two levels. 1. the level of experience; 2. the level of theory and doctrine. When you asked me to come and discuss this matter you will have known, of course, that I am a convinced Christian, so I'm going to read a passage from the New Testament. It is part of the Christian gospel, and as I read it you will be able to see what my presuppositions and my prejudices are. I would not wish to fly under false colours. I shall attempt to critique other systems fairly, and true to what they believe, but I am a Christian. As to the question of what leads us to God, I would simply point you to this passage:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom 5:8-11)

1. The level of experience

Our topic, then, is 'do all religions lead to God?' Some people seem to think, and it's a very attractive theory, that all religions lead to the same goal, whatever their particular doctrines are. So the best way to think about religion is to neglect the particular doctrines that mark the

distinctions of any one religion and go for the goal it is aiming at—to bring us eventually to God.

To use the old Chinese proverb, there are many ways up a mountain. You can start from very different points, follow different ways up the mountain, but if you persevere on the particular way you have chosen, and everybody goes his or her own way up the mountain, you will eventually all reach the top. It doesn't matter, therefore, what the particular doctrines of any one religion are. Whatever religion they follow, so long as people faithfully follow those doctrines they will all arrive at the top, which is, God. But to talk like that seems to me to be somewhat shallow, and neglects what the major religions in fact believe, and what they hold to be the goal of religion.

Animism

Let's start off with a very ancient form of religion, namely Animism. That is the form of religion in which people feel that there is a spirit, or a god (however you call it) in trees, in stones, in mountains, in rivers, and so forth and so on. You might be inclined to think that that's a very primitive religion, but one of the most sophisticated nations on earth, Japan, still tenaciously holds the doctrine of animism. If we respect their culture—and we do respect their engineering, science and technology, of course—we shall try to understand their religion.

When I was in Tokyo at one stage, friends of mine took me to an animist shrine. It was most beautifully kept; dedicated to the spirit of a famous emperor of Japan. I went along and observed the beauty of the place, its architecture and the gardens around it. As I arrived, a young man was conducting a service for businessmen, and when it was finished I asked my friends who had taken me if the priest would allow me to come and question him a little. They thought he would, so I was allowed to speak to him. He was a very gracious young man whom you would immediately respect.

I said to him, 'I'm an Englishman, and I've never seen anything like this before. Might I ask you some questions?'

He said, 'Certainly, sir,' and he was joined by another young priest.

I said, 'Tell me, is your shrine a place where I could come and get forgiveness of sins?'

He said, 'What kind of sins are you thinking of?'

I said, 'Well, suppose I had engaged in a lot of fraudulent cheating in business or something, or told a lie, or committed immorality, may I come to your shrine and you could show me how I could get forgiveness?'

'No, he said, 'we don't deal with that kind of thing; we deal with spiritual sins. For that kind of thing, you would have to go to the authorities, to the government.'

I said, 'What are spiritual sins, then?'

'If you came in contact with a dead body you would be defiled, or a woman after childbirth would be defiled, and before you could come and stand before the great spirit in this shrine, you would need to be cleansed.'

I said, 'Is that so?', and one thing followed another. 'Tell me, why are you two fellows doing all this? What is the point of it?'

He said, 'We hope to make ourselves better men.'

I said, 'What do you think is going to happen to you after you die?'

They said, 'We don't know. Our priests tell us that it's perhaps like a tree that's cut down and then grows again, and perhaps there's a paradise a long way off, but nobody knows.'

In that moment, I must say I felt a great compassion for those young men. Delightful young men they were, sincere as sincere could be, but as for their religion leading them to God, according to their own confession, it was not so.

I went to another animist shrine in another part of Japan. It was a magnificent shrine where the emperor himself goes, and a priest came to explain the various things.

I said, 'Tell me, do you as a priest get called out when people are dying to bring them a message of hope?'

'No,' he said, 'I come after they're dead and I conduct the funeral.'

I happen to know that the funeral would cost a lot of money, but as for having any hope for men and women on the border of eternity, he self-confessedly had none.

Malaysian death shops

Finding myself some years ago in Kuala Lumpur, walking down the main street I came across what then was called a death shop. This was a club to which people belonged, and the idea was that if your loved ones were now fatally ill and going to die, you wouldn't necessarily want them to die at home because their spirits would defile your home. And so they belonged to this club where they could go and die. I asked permission to go in. I was welcomed in and I saw what went on. It's vivid in front of my mind just now.

As I went down into the basement there were two bodies. One was wrapped up in newspaper, another in a coffin, and two women sat on the floor beside it. They had a tin can, like an old petrol can. In it was 'money' (not real money), which they were burning at the foot of the corpse. They believed that after death the person goes down into the shadowy underworld, where they will need support: they will need to buy things for themselves and so on. So they were burning this money and they believed that it would go down to their loved one in the world beyond. I was told that the wealthier people would pay hundreds of pounds for beautiful models of aeroplanes, cars and luxury yachts to be made, and they would burn them likewise for the benefit of their loved ones.

At that time in Belfast I had a number of Chinese students. The proud father of one of them came across to his son's graduation and treated us all to a sumptuous lunch. I told him I'd been to KL recently, this is what I'd seen, and was it true that people did this, and would he, as a businessman, do it?

He said, 'I can't explain it; but yes I would, just to make sure.'

Do all religions lead to God? Well, that didn't, on their own confession. And you will protest to me, 'But you're not being fair; you're citing the superstitious end of that religion. You could easily cite the superstitious end of Christendom, where all kinds of superstitious practices are performed by people to help them somehow into the other world.'

Your point is real, and that's perfectly true; so let's go to the other end and talk now about theory and doctrine.

2. The level of theory and doctrine

Buddhism and Hinduism

If it's true that all religions lead to God, does Buddhism lead to God? It would depend on what kind of Buddhism you are talking about. If you are talking about the original Buddhism that the Buddha taught after his enlightenment, then by definition it doesn't lead to God, for the Buddha expressly said so. Original Buddhism has nothing to do with God whatsoever, and he warned people against treating him as a god.

What he thought he had discovered was merely a psychological way of manipulating one's human desires. He concluded, as he sat under his tree, that the trouble with us humans is our desires that push us here and prompt us there, and make slaves of us. Our desires bring us much dissatisfaction. He thought he saw the cure, if we could get rid of our desires. And how do you do that? So he suggested certain psychological techniques for getting rid of one's desires, which would lead to a life of peace and serenity, but had nothing to do with God.

Original Buddhism did not lead to God. But, of course, there are many, many forms of Buddhism in the popular mind, and Buddhism acknowledges so many different gods that it would be difficult in one short moment to pass a true comment on them. But if you take the more elevated forms of Buddhist theory, and ask, 'What is God like?', or, 'What is the supreme being like?', Buddhists will tend to answer like Hindus do, because, after all, Buddhism is an offshoot of Hinduism. So, together with Hinduism, Buddhism will answer, 'The great source of everything is Brahma, or, in English, "the One".'

They worked out what the One is like by sheer dint of their philosophical thought, like the Greeks and Aristotle did. So, what is the One like, that is the source of everything? They have decided that he is absolute perfection: so perfect that he has no duality. There is no two-ness in him.

What does that mean? Well, let me explain. You're a human being, and if I asked you if you have got a personality, you would say, 'Yes, I'm a human person.'

I'm glad of that. And you're conscious?

'Yes,' you say, 'of course I'm conscious. How can you be a human being and how you can have a personality, without being conscious?'

Hinduism and Buddhism reply that the One from whom the whole universe has sprung cannot be a person; he's not even conscious. Why not? Because if you are conscious, there are two things. There's you, who are conscious; and then there's something that you are conscious of. That makes two things, and according to their philosophy that is utterly impossible for the One. He is so perfect, therefore he is not a person; he is not conscious.

We have come from him somehow or other. Or should we say from 'it', because he's not a person. It's simply, they explain, as sunbeams from the sun. The sun is so mighty and powerful that every day it gives out sunbeams; but the sun doesn't know it's giving out sunbeams. And the One from which the whole universe has come, from which you and I have come, is not conscious of you. It is not aware that you exist, and cares nothing for you whatsoever.

That is Hinduism and that is Buddhism. You will notice, perhaps, in the tone of my voice, my Christianity is making its protest. What sort of a god is that, if it's what Buddhism leads us to?

The ancient Greek philosophers

But it's not just Buddhism. The ancient Greek philosophers argued what God must be like. The great and famous Aristotle, pioneer of the study of biology in Europe, tells us in his work that the supreme God is perfect; he is one unit, one thing, and there's no duality in him. Therefore he is not concerned about you. It's like a woman who is so beautiful that lots of men are attracted to her, but she doesn't care tuppence for any of them. That's the wisdom of the Greeks. Or, some of the Greeks: Aristotle, for instance, as distinct from Plato.

Of course, you'll say to me, 'You're prejudiced.'

Yes, I am indeed, because I'm a Christian and I believe that the God from whom we come so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish (see John 3:16). God is infinitely great, yet his Son tells us that he knows the number of the hairs of your head (Luke 12:7). He is a personal God; a God who knows us and a God who personally loves us. But I must not let my Christianity intrude, too soon at any rate.

Do all religions lead to God? Well, if you're asking about Hindu philosophy, Shankara's philosophy for instance, or the Hindu religion, or Buddhism, you'll have to ask them what kind of a god they lead to.

Pantheism

But, if this god isn't interested in us, is he concerned whether we lead a moral life or not, then? That is a difficult question both for Buddhism and for Hinduism, because they hold that everything comes from this source, and not only comes from it, but *everything is God*. The sunbeams coming from the sun are part of the sun, aren't they? And in the same way these people hold that everything in the universe is part of God. Or, put it another way, all of it is God. God is everything. The technical term is *pantheism*.

You say, 'Half a moment. We can agree that good is God, but what about evil?'

'Evil is God as well,' they will say. 'The wise man is God; the ignorant man is God.'

Really? That's a very big moral problem, isn't it? You see, Buddhism, and Hinduism in particular, holds that inside everybody is his or her soul. Inside you, for instance—your *Ātman*, as they call it, your soul is God. The biggest criminal walking on the streets of Belfast, his soul is God; all comes from God, and ultimately all is God. That is pantheism.

Do all religions lead to God? Well, we should need to ask what kind of god. Do they exhort us to live good lives? Well, yes, they have a doctrine that says we shouldn't do bad things in this life, because if we do bad things we load ourselves with the consequences: the old law of what you sow, you reap. So, if you do bad things, what you get is a load of what they call *karma*, and the only way to get rid of that is to suffer. There is no forgiveness.

Have you ever done anything bad? You'll reap what you sow, and if, when you die, you haven't suffered enough to get rid of this karma that you have deserved, instead of being

merged with the great One, their god, you will have to come back again in life, be reincarnated, so that you can suffer and get rid of your karma. And if, when you come back, you do other sins, that will but add to your karma. If need be, you'll have to come back thousands of times to get rid of your karma.

Can I be certain when I die, then, that all my bad deeds have been suffered for, and they're gone, so I shan't have to come back?

'No, you can't,' they say.

And then the doctrine has some horrendous implications. Here's a little baby, and it's born deformed in some fashion, or with a disease. Why? And they will say, 'Because, in a previous incarnation, that person sinned and did wrong. It has now to be born into this world so that it can suffer for the sins he or she did in the previous incarnation.'

If you say, 'What sins did this little baby commit in a previous incarnation?', they can't tell you. 'How many reincarnations has it been through?' They can't tell you. 'How many incarnations will it have to go through before it's quit?' They can't tell you that either.

Plotinus the Greek was a later representation of this sort of thought. He said, 'If a woman gets raped, she deserves to be raped.'

Why?

'Because, in a previous incarnation, she was a man who raped a woman. Now that man is reincarnated as a woman, and deserves to be raped.'

If you find people suffering, it's because of their karma. It's pointless your trying to help them; the only way they can get rid of their karma is to suffer themselves. Hence the vast poverty and the hardness of heart in some countries that hold this doctrine.

I want to say as a Christian that it strikes me as exceedingly cruel, though it appeals to some. I met a senior policeman at a study group once, and he affirmed to me afterwards that he thought Hinduism was far superior to Christianity.

'People have to suffer for their own sins,' he said, 'and if you don't suffer enough in this life, you get another chance to come back again.'

To some people it seems attractive, because the Christian gospel says that 'it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement' (Heb 9:27), and that decides our eternity. What about our sins? That lies at the heart of the Christian gospel, and the love of God in giving his Son to suffer the penalty of our sin so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. But there is no forgiveness in Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism.

I remember years ago, I was asked by some of my colleagues in the chemistry department at Queen's if I would be prepared to have a Buddhist from Thailand come to visit me and ask me questions. I said, 'Certainly, I'd be delighted.' As she came and sat down, she said, 'I'm a Buddhist and I want to ask you, if I may, about what Christians believe. I am not going to get converted,' said she, 'I simply want to know what Christians believe.'

So, I did my best to tell her what Christians believe: how, through Christ and his death at Calvary, we can have complete forgiveness by God. God doesn't say that our sins don't matter; he required the penalty, the penalty has been paid, and therefore God is perfectly just in granting us forgiveness. And I added, not only are we given forgiveness through faith in Christ, but here and now in this life we may be utterly sure that we have forgiveness.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)

To illustrate the point, I said to her, 'For instance, if you had a little daughter, and she had done something wrong, you would have to rebuke her and show your disapproval. But if the child said "I'm sorry, Mummy", you would forgive her, wouldn't you? You would make it clear to the child, leave her in no doubt, that she had been forgiven. You wouldn't say, "Well, you've done wrong. I'll see one of these days whether I can forgive you, but I'm not telling you now. You must wait and see." You wouldn't say that, would you? You'd forgive the child and assure her that you have forgiven her.'

'No, I wouldn't,' she said. 'Who am I to forgive anybody? I can't forgive anybody. Parents can't forgive their children. No-one can forgive you.'

There isn't anyone there to forgive, because the supreme One couldn't care less about you; doesn't even know you exist. There's no forgiveness.

'She just has to bear her karma, that's all,' said the Thai Buddhist to me.

Do all religions lead to God? Well, again we must ask what kind of a god they lead to.

Judaism, Islam, and Christianity

But let's leave that kind of religion and come to the three great monotheistic faiths: the religions that believe in one God, as distinct from multitudes of gods. Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Do they all lead to God? They all believe in one God. In what sense do they all lead to God?

Judaism

Let's take Judaism first. Christians, Orthodox Christians at any rate, believe the Jewish Old Testament with all their hearts. They believe it's inspired of God. They believe that God chose Abraham as father of the Jewish race and raised him up as a protest against the idolatrous explanations of the universe that were to be found in that pagan society. They believe in the prophets of Judaism, and especially one prophet. They believe that the Old Testament pointed forward to the coming of the Saviour, the Messiah, who would deal with our basic human problem: the problem of our sin and guilt as responsible men and women before God our Creator.

Christians believe that God sent his Son. But modern Jews, and Jews in general for many centuries, will not accept that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is the Son of God, or that he rose from the dead; and they refuse to believe that his death is a sacrifice for sin. But if there is no sacrifice for sin, how can a religion bring us to God?

Years and years ago, I was delivering some lectures at the University of Cambridge on behalf of the Christian Union there, and they had asked me to expound 1 and 2 Kings in the Old Testament. After one of the sessions, a student came to me and asked if he might speak. I said, 'Yes, certainly.'

He said, 'You know, it moves me very deeply to hear you expounding my Scriptures.'

I said, 'I'm pleased to hear that. You are a Jew?'

'Yes,' he said.

I said, 'But don't your rabbis expound the Old Testament to you?'

'Not very often,' he said.

I said, 'What a pity? Why don't they begin to preach to us Gentiles great chunks of Isaiah, for instance, where God denounces idolatry? Our modern world is full of idolatry of every kind.'

Well, he couldn't say why they didn't.

He came to dinner once or twice, and I found an opportunity to say, 'You know, I am impressed by the Old Testament and by your law. The standards set out in the law of God through Moses are still relevant. God not only gave the law, but when people broke that law he did not say, "It doesn't matter".'

'You see, if I get drunk, and drive my car, and knock your daughter down and kill her, will you turn round eventually and say, "It doesn't matter"? You won't, will you? You will say that I ought to be punished, and so would the law of the land, and so will God. And if I don't repent of what I've done to your daughter, God will have it against me for all eternity, for the simple reason that he loves your daughter and cannot begin to say that sin against your daughter doesn't matter.'

'Therefore, I have great respect for your Old Testament. Not only its law, but that series of sacrifices that you were told to offer. When you broke God's law, you had to offer sacrifices to get forgiveness. Do you think the sacrifice of those animals did anything, really, to put away sin?'

He said, 'No, I don't. I don't think that at all. How could the blood of a cow atone for human sin? Cows don't know anything about sin.'

So I said, 'These sacrifices were symbols, then?'

'Yes,' he said, 'they were symbols.'

I said, 'Symbols of what?'

'No,' he said, 'don't press that; you'll spoil our friendship.'

He sensed immediately what I was going to say; that those Old Testament sacrifices were symbols in advance, picture language that would point to the coming of the one whom the New Testament calls the Lamb of God, who died for the sins of the world (see John 1:29).

I said, 'I don't want to spoil our friendship, but isn't it the historic fact that, when Christ offered himself to the Jewish nation as the one who had come to die for their sins, Israel rejected it, and rejected him?'

God gave them forty years to repent and change their minds. When they wouldn't, God allowed the Romans to raze their temple to the ground. The Jews, therefore, still have the law, but they're not allowed to offer any sacrifices, for the only place they could offer sacrifice is at the temple at Jerusalem. And now that's gone, Judaism has no answer to the necessary atonement for sin.

Islam

And what about Islam?

You say, 'It is one of the three monotheistic faiths.'

Yes, that's right.

'It worships one God.'

Yes, that's true.

'Does it lead to God in the same way that the Christian gospel leads to God?'

Islam believes a lot of things. It believes that Jesus is the Messiah. Isa, they call him. They believe that he was born of a virgin. They believe that John the Baptist was a prophet who told us to believe the Lamb of God. They believe that Jesus is now in heaven, whereas Muhammad is in his grave. Muslims believe that Jesus is coming again; but they hold that, when he comes again, he will tell the world that Muhammad is the true prophet.

But one thing Islam will not have is that Jesus died on the cross. A Muslim will get very upset if you insist that Jesus died at Calvary on the cross. 'No, he didn't. At the last minute God substituted somebody else,' they will say, though they can't tell you who else it was. And because they will not have it that the Saviour died for them, they have no other saviour. Whereas Christians will sing to themselves, 'What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.'¹ That is God's answer to the predicament of human sin.

A Muslim has no answer to it, and therefore he has no Saviour.

I was in Jordan a few years ago, and was asked to dinner by some gracious and friendly Jordanians. One was an architect, and others were medical professors of various kinds. After dinner, when conversation came round, they said to me, 'All this strife between Christians and Muslims, it's all stupid: all unnecessary, because we all believe the same thing. So, why can't we acknowledge we all believe the same thing and have done with all this terrorism, bombing and strife?'

I said, 'I understand what you're saying.'

'Yes, we all believe the same thing,' they said, 'except that you Christians have changed the Bible.'

I said, 'Is that so? I wasn't aware we had.'

'Yes, you've changed the Bible to make it say that Jesus died on the cross, when he didn't die.'

I had in my pocket a little Bible, and I said to these dear men, 'Do you mind if I read you something?'

'No, carry on,' they said.

So I said, 'What I'm going to read you was written seven or more centuries before Jesus Christ was born. We Christians didn't write it. It was the Jews who wrote it, and we certainly haven't changed it. So I read those famous words written by Isaiah:

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his

¹ Robert Lowry (1826-1899), 'Nothing but the blood of Jesus' (1876).

mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgement he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. (53:5–11)

‘But you’re going to say that’s Jesus, aren’t you?’

I said, ‘Yes, I will eventually say it’s Jesus; but just for the moment I’m not saying it. All I’m asking you to realize is that it was written seven hundred years before Jesus Christ was born and I believe that when Christ came he fulfilled it. Christians didn’t write it, we certainly haven’t changed it; but we believe that Jesus Christ is the one of whom Isaiah 53 prophesied, and he has become our Saviour.’

Christianity

Do all religions lead to God? It depends what you mean by ‘leading to God’. If you mean bringing a man or woman into reconciliation with God, into the wonder of forgiveness, the joy of acceptance and peace of mind; if you’re asking about peace with God, justification, being sure hope of heaven and the present gift of eternal life, then, in my experience of many different religions, I publicly claim that Jesus Christ is the only one in the running. Excuse me for putting it that way, but there is no one else I know of in the whole of history in all the various religions.

There is no other like Jesus Christ, who will say to you, ‘I am your Creator incarnate. You have sinned and broken God’s law. You deserve its penalty, but I love you with a Creator’s love. I gave myself for you and, rather than you perish under the penalty of sin, I died your death, I bore your punishment. I have risen from the dead and if you will accept me as your Lord and Saviour, I have authority to give you forgiveness and peace with God, the present enjoyment of eternal life, and the sure hope of heaven.’

That is my case. The only one I know of, who can bring you into reconciliation with God like that, is the only one in the whole of history who died for you personally, the just for the unjust, that he might bring you to God (see 1 Pet 3:18).

Forgive me for any inaccuracy in describing other religions, I’ve done my best in the short time to be exact. Because we must all face the question, do tell me how we can recognize the truth among so many voices. The true God is the one who will give himself for you, so that you might be saved.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, from all the claims of this world both ancient and modern, we now come to thee. We have thought about these sundry claims of different religions, but we pray now that thou wilt take thy word about thy dear Son, whom thou hast given us—the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, and speak it to all our hearts in such way that our faith shall not rest in the cleverness of argument but in discovering the living God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Hear us, we pray, for his name's sake. Amen.

Is Faith Rational?

Our topic this evening, as you have heard, is 'Is Faith Rational?', and I would like to begin by reading a passage from the New Testament. Later on in our talk the passage will become relevant, and it will be good if it doesn't come as too much of a surprise.

This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:6–12)

So far, then, the word of God, and we shall come back to consider it later on.

I should like to begin by telling you a fable, or rather, a bit of a parable. I made it up myself, so I can tell you that it's true in its way. The parable is about some Pygmies in the rainforest of Zaire. One day, in the course of their sundry occupations in the rainforest, to their surprise they came across a motor car. They didn't know how it had got there, or even what it was. Nor can I tell you! Of course, in the end, curiosity got the better of them, and they began to examine this strong object. They opened its doors, fiddled about with the steering wheel, and eventually someone turned the ignition key and the engine sprang into life, and they were terrified. The thing was alive, they thought. So they pondered the situation and decided there must be a god inside, making it go.

And then one who was learned in these things noticed there were four letters on the front of it, F-O-R-D, and decided this was the name of the god inside, Ford. Well, eventually, they took to engineering, and studies, and things like that, as people will do if they get the chance, and they took the thing to pieces bit by bit and ended up by understanding all of its works. They felt quite proud of their achievement. They could now explain to you how it all worked; and the interesting thing was, they found there wasn't any god in the engine, nor did they need any god in the engine to explain how it went. They could understand it perfectly without any god. Then they made a great leap of logic. Because they didn't find any god in the engine, they decided there had never been a god who designed it.

Can you see the falsity of that step of logic? Sometimes I hear very learned professors telling us that they can now understand how our universe works. We admire their

tremendous scientific skill and insight, but they add that, because they can understand how it all works, they don't have to suppose there's a God.

'We've no need of God to explain how the universe works,' they say.

But then they take a similar leap of logic and declare that they don't believe there ever was a God who designed and made the universe. Like the Pygmies, they decide there never was a Mr Ford.

It's a false step of logic, isn't it? But then Professor Walport of London, like many other atheistic scientists, will tell us frequently on BBC Radio 4 that science is the thing. Science proceeds by investigation, by drawing scientific hypotheses, examining the evidence, testing the theories, and comes to assured results because of the processes of science.

And then he will say, 'Believe in religion if you care to, but the difference between science and religion is that religion is all arbitrary. There is no evidence, there is no proof; you just make up your mind to believe. That's what faith is—just arbitrarily making up your mind to believe some story or other, without any proof.'

Many people are of that opinion. Science deals in proof; religion is a matter of faith. Faith is arbitrary, and there's no proof as to whether it is right or wrong.

Science too is built on faith

And yet, for all the scientists claim, science itself is built on faith, as Einstein himself pointed out. You can see an example of it in recent times, when, in the middle of the last century and onwards, scientists discovered the quantum theory of physics. They came across very strange things. You get a little particle of stuff here, and it interacts with another little particle of stuff. Then somehow they split; one goes off here and one goes off there, and now, perhaps, they're light years away from each other. But the scientists found that if you interfere with this little particle over here and do something to it, the other particle, light years away, will immediately change according to what you have done to the first particle. Einstein himself found it very difficult to believe that.

But we did have a learned professor of science, who was born in the Shankill area of Belfast in 1928; Professor John Bell proved Einstein wrong.² Then the French came along and invented an experiment to prove that Professor Bell was right. So, Belfast can claim certain honours. Einstein found that difficult, and he said, 'But how could that happen? It would mean that information from this particle here, that you've just altered—the fact that it had been altered would have to be conveyed to that other particle light years away. It would have to travel faster than the speed of light itself.' So, for Einstein, that upset all his physics.

So, what did the scientists do?

You say, 'They gave up physics!'

No, they didn't. They were faced with a very big problem they couldn't as yet solve, but they went on with their research. Why? On what ground? On the ground of faith, for all science depends on faith that it is worth investigating the universe around us. Why does that

² Bell's Theorem—more formally known as 'On the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox'—demonstrated that Einstein's views on quantum mechanics—the behaviour of very small things like atoms and subatomic particles—were incorrect. ([John Bell: The Belfast scientist who proved Einstein wrong](#), by Greg McKeivitt, BBC News, N.I., 4 November 2014.)

require faith? Well, it might have turned out to be just a chaos of mumbo jumbo, with no regular rules, laws, or anything about it. One day it's this way, and tomorrow it's some other way. That would have made science impossible.

Science and its research is based on the fundamental faith that it is worth examining the universe, because faith tells us that the universe is logical and rational, and will repay rational study. It would be good if we had a few more scientists like Einstein, who admitted to the world that science itself is built on faith.

Can faith prove that God exists?

There are many, however, who want to make the contrast. They say that science is built on facts, demonstrations and proofs, but you can't prove belief in God. And what they mean is that you can't prove it on a piece of paper, by some kind of logical argument. You can't prove by philosophical logic that God exists and so they dismiss it as airy-fairy. Faith is arbitrary, they say, because you can't prove it.

And my reply to such people is to say, 'Can a child prove that his mother loves him? A seven-year-old says, "Mummy loves me," and you say, "Prove it!"' How do you suppose the child would be able to prove by philosophical logic that his mother loves him before it would be right for him to believe that she does?

Have you got a girlfriend, sir? Prove to me that she loves you in a way she loves nobody else. I want it proved with a premise based on philosophically logical deductions. Can you do it? Of course you can't. So I suppose you'll give up your girlfriend? You don't believe in her any more because belief in her would be irrational. Really?

Could you prove to me with philosophical logic that your banker is reliable? And tomorrow, if you're going on a plane to London, can you prove to me with philosophical logic that the plane won't come down in mid-air? You can't, and yet you'll go in faith.

Suppose I said, 'I'm not getting on that plane. You can go on it if you like, but your faith in that plane is not rational. I demand philosophical proof that the engines will go and will not stop, nor will they suffer any mechanical breakdown until we land safely in London. I shall want a letter from the airline proving every point before I get on it.'

Would you say that I am being rational? You wouldn't, would you? You'd say the very opposite. That kind of demand is not rational. Now we're using 'rational' in the sense of 'reasonable'. There are ten thousand things in life that all of us believe without philosophical proof, and we're not irrational to do so.

A question that science cannot answer

When it comes to understanding either the universe at large or ourselves, a question arises that science cannot begin to answer. We know how the universe works and how our bodies work, more or less. But what's the universe for and what are our lives for? What is the purpose?

Perhaps I'm talking to people who have a great purpose in life. You support some politician because you ardently believe in certain principles. Did you come at those principles by philosophical logic, or are they things that come out of your heart and

conscience? You believe in them so strongly that you're prepared to put your effort, and indeed your life into them. Many people so support their political parties, even though they might have a job to prove philosophically that they are absolutely correct in all their details. Now it's a question of values and purpose, isn't it?

Tell me, what is the real purpose of life as a whole? And if I may be so stern, what's going to happen to you when you die? It's not a topic we like to dwell on, but wouldn't it be irrational not to think about it? Doesn't rationality demand that we face facts? One day we shall die, unless Jesus Christ returns and takes believers home to glory without dying, as he promised he would. What's going to happen to you then?

You say, 'I don't think about that, because that would be irrational faith.'

Well, multitudes of people have thought about it, and still think about it. Various religions have all sorts of theories. The Hindus will tell you that eventually you will come back again by *transmigration of soul*.³ Our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, said that there is a heaven, and there is a hell.

You say, 'I can't be sure.'

Is it therefore rational not to think about it? All who hold these things are agreed that the way we have behaved in this life will affect our experience after death. Aren't there moments when you agree too, because you believe in morality? You think that utter rotters like Hitler and company should not get away with things; you think morality is all important. How important do you think it is? Would you have the claims of morality end when a person dies, so that, if I've been an outrageous criminal and the law begins to catch up with me, I shoot my brains out and I've won? Or would you hold that morality, by its very nature, is trans-temporal? We shall have to face it after death as well as before? The Bible says it is appointed to men and women—that is, for human beings—once to die, and after that the judgment. Not being sure is not adequate intellectual grounds for ignoring the situation, and not trying to find out what the truth is.

Basic knowledge

But let me move on. People say, 'Science is based on scientific investigation, evidence, logical deduction, hypothesis, theory, testing of theory, proof—it is very rational. Faith [in God] is airy-fairy stuff—no evidence, arbitrary.'

Let me tell you something that may sound quite irrelevant. My neighbours across the road have a magnolia tree, and just at this time of year it has, I should think, five thousand blossoms on it. It is a magnificent sight.

You say, 'How do you know, Gooding?'

How do I know that this tree is in blossom? Did somebody suggest that I had got a sort of a colour thing on my eye that registered on my brain, and when I said to myself, 'What kind of a thing can this colour be?' I came to the logical conclusion that it was a magnolia tree? Is that how I did it?

You say, 'Don't be silly. You knew it was in bloom because you saw it.'

³ In Hinduism, the individual soul enters a new existence after the death of the body (www.encyclopedia.com).

Do you think my brain was acting properly when it saw the magnolias, or some daffodils, and confidently said 'the daffodils are in bloom'? I don't think you would expect me to prove it by some logical inference, would you?

There are certain things in life that we know; what the philosophers called *basic knowledge*. We know by just looking at them, because we see them, because we experience them. Isn't that true? It's what we have minds for.

Let me do a little anatomy on you. You have a heart inside here somewhere on the left-hand side, generally speaking. What do you believe it's for, this heart thing?

You say, 'The purpose of the heart is to pump blood round the system; that's what it's for.'

Do you think it was designed that way?

'Well,' you say, 'it's a very clever design, and when it's working and does its job properly, it's a magnificent thing.'

You say, 'Yes, and thank God for the stomach! It's designed to process the food and send it around the system via the liver and the kidneys and other such things, to feed the brain and the muscles and the bones, and everything else.'

So that's what it's for, and you think it does a moderately good job. What do you say about my brain, then, when I look at that tree and I know what it is, and I don't have to prove it either? Was my brain designed to do that? Is it reliable? I make mistakes, of course, and see mirages and things, but most of the time it's working as it was meant to work. And because I'm a Christian I believe in a God who designed it.

Our built-in awareness of God

I'll tell you something else I know; that my mind is designed to know, and your mind as well. There is a God. I suspect you might be of the opinion that you don't know there's a God, but you actually do. At least, that's what the Bible says (Rom 1:20–21). It says that God our Creator has put within our hearts the awareness that there is a God. It's built-in, and is frequently triggered when we go out, for instance, on a starry night, and see the majestic, magnificent display of the planets and the stars and the galaxies, and we're overwhelmed with the realization there must be a God.

The great philosopher, Kant, held that you couldn't prove that God exists. His philosophical reason has not stood the test of time. But he said that two things made him aware that there is a God: 'the moral law within and the starry heavens above.' His moral conscience within demanded that sin shall be dealt with. Very often it isn't dealt with in this life, so there must be a God who will enforce his moral law in the life to come.

You say, 'but how can I believe in God when there are so many terrible things that happen in the world?'

Wait a minute! The Bible doesn't say that the starry heavens and creation are evidence that God is love. It doesn't say that. It says that they are evidence of his almighty power. To find out that God is love we must look elsewhere, where God has shown it. So, the Bible tells us that very often men and women try to suppress that knowledge to convince themselves that they don't know, when all the while they do. You'll see it in the atheist who in a sudden crisis will say, 'Oh God, help me.'

Yes, there is a God, and how shall we know what he is like? The Bible claims that no one has ever seen God, but the only begotten Son, who comes from the very bosom of the Father, has told him out (John 1:18). Jesus Christ is God incarnate. As he himself put it, he came to seek and to save that which is lost (Luke 19:10). So it is not a question merely of our trying to reach up to heaven, but the God who made us has come down from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ, to seek and to save us.

You say, 'But how would he prove he is the Son of God?'

According to John, the evangelist in the fourth Gospel, one of the early things our Lord did was to ask the people to consider and use their moral judgment on Christ's moral teaching. Have you ever done it? The so-called Sermon on the Mount is a compendium by Matthew, summarizing the moral teaching of Jesus Christ our Lord. How would you find out whether it was true or not? Well, read it, try to live it, ask if it is morally true. I have not the time to elaborate on its details. The verdict of history has been that the Sermon on the Mount, if nothing else, puts Jesus Christ preeminent among the moral teachers of the world. Live with Jesus Christ and his moral teaching for six months, and you will find that his diagnosis of the human heart is correct.

Are Christ's claims true?

But another thing follows. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, preeminent as a moral teacher in our world, also claimed to be God incarnate, which sets us a question that must be decided. If the author of the Sermon on the Mount—the high Himalayas of moral teaching—claimed to be the Son of God when he wasn't, and his claim was a deception, then Jesus Christ is the biggest imposter and rotter that ever walked the face of the earth. Did he pretend one minute to preach morality and the next minute deliberately lie and deceive?

Are you a good judge of human character? Christ will demand that you test not only his moral character, but his own moral sinlessness. 'Which one of you convicts me of sin?', said he to his critics (John 8:46). He claimed to be the Son of God. It is not rational behaviour to ignore his claim. To study it and come to your decision is a serious matter, but to ignore it is not rational. It's ostrich-like to put your head in the sand and not face the big question.

You say, 'What evidence has he?'

His miracles and his parables

Within my time limits, let me tell you some of the evidence. It is not true that faith in Christ is a leap in the dark that you suddenly decide to take. The Bible itself offers you evidence that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and among the evidence are his miracles: called 'signs' in John's Gospel. They were done 'so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (John 20:31).

You say, 'That's just the trouble, I don't believe the record. I don't believe miracles are possible, and if I've first of all got to believe a miracle, like him turning water into wine at some wedding, I don't believe it to start with. I don't believe miracles are possible, so what's the good of my reading it?'

Okay, you don't believe that miracles are possible. But then, as well as being miracles that actually happened, they were also parables, weren't they? For instance, he multiplied

bread and fish miraculously and fed a multitude of five thousand (John 6:1–14). Having done that, he preached to the people and said, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst’ (v. 35). The miracle became a parable.

So did his first miracle, the making of the water into wine at a wedding in Galilee (John 2). It was a miracle, but a parable as well. At this wedding the wine ran out. Weddings are special days to be celebrated in people’s lives and the wine was there to facilitate the joy of the occasion, but the wine ran out. What is it saying as a parable? That the wine sometimes runs out at weddings, and so does the joy. Is that true? It’s runs out of many these days, and there are almost as many divorces as there are marriages. The wine runs out; the joy runs out. It’s a fact, and it’s not irrational to say so. And not only does the joy run out of the marriage relationship, but between parents and children, and fathers and mothers. The joy of human relationships so often runs out.

Why does it run out? When our Lord did the miracle of turning water into wine, he didn’t do it just with any old water. There were many enormous great pots there, holding gallons of water. They were there for the purifying of Jews. Among their customs was this insistence on cleanliness, and at weddings in particular the guests needed to be cleansed constantly. It was ritual cleansing as well as physical cleansing.

In days gone by, when I was young, the girls at a wedding liked to wear white, to profess that they were virgins. Weddings made people think of purity and cleanliness. It’s gone by the board, and the wine has run out at many weddings.

When our Lord met the need, he didn’t just command wine to come down out of heaven, to fall through the roof into the wine glasses. He took that water of purifying and turned it into wine. That was a parable, wasn’t it? You see, that water was there as part of their religion, and at all times you had to be ritually pure; but at a wedding particularly so.

The trouble with that water was that it could only cleanse your skin. I suppose some weddings break up if the husband doesn’t bath frequently enough, or something. That isn’t the chief problem, is it? Commenting upon this situation elsewhere, our Lord himself said, ‘It’s not what goes into a man defiles him, but what comes out of him. Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These things defile a person’ (see Matt 15:18–20). Among them pre-eminently is selfishness and rejection of God, the Creator.

What is there that can deal with that, and change the human heart at that level? That is what Jesus Christ said he had come to do.

He came, firstly, to bring us cleansing of the heart from a guilty conscience, the guilt that comes from being aware that we have offended not merely our friends and loved ones, but have offended against God Almighty, and deserve God’s indignation. Christ came to deal with that guilt. Not by pretending it doesn’t matter, but stepping in himself as our substitute to bear the penalty of the law we have broken, so that we might be forgiven and enter the very family of God.

And secondly, he came to perform the wonderful miracle of regeneration by the power of the living Holy Spirit of God, so that our hearts may be cleansed from an evil conscience

and our persons bathed with the pure water of the Holy Spirit's regeneration (Heb 10:22). That is the claim of Christ.

Is it true, or not?

One can listen to the experience of those who have proved him true. The only way to personally prove him true is by listening to him, coming to believe in him, and allowing him to make that cleansing of conscience and cleansing of behaviour by his Holy Spirit.

'How shall I know? How can I be sure?', you say.

In that passage I read at the beginning of my discourse, we have the apostle John writing to Christians, and he tells us the reason he writes: 'that you may know that you have eternal life, you who have believed on the name of the son of God' (see 1 John 5:13).

So, John first presents the evidence. Jesus Christ was marked by this, 'he came by water and by blood' (see v. 6). When he was baptized, it was the official demonstration through John the Baptist that Jesus was the Lamb of God, sent to bear away the sin of the world. When he came to Calvary, he showed what the prime purpose of his coming was: to put away sin. To come alongside us and take from us the burden of our guilt and bear it for our sakes. For us he suffered God's holy indignation and the penalty of the law, so that we might go free.

As I said on a former occasion,⁴ there's only one who will ever come alongside you and say in your ear and to your heart, 'I am your Creator incarnate. You've gone your own way; you have transgressed God's holy law; you deserve its punishment. But I'm your Creator, and I love you with a Creator's love, and rather than you perish eternally I died for you.'

As the Irish hymn has it,

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood.⁵

No one else in any other religion this world through will ever talk to you like that. You'll only have to decide it once; but Christ will seek and demand a reply from you.

'Then how shall I know it works, and how shall I know I have this eternal life?'

John eventually gives us the answer, and he makes it clear that faith is not irrational. Faith is a making up of our minds about the character of God. Is God a liar, or not? This is the pivot. Can you trust God and the testimony he has given about his Son? Who should know more about his Son than God?

We ring up the travel agent and ask, 'What time is the next plane to London?'. A voice we've never heard before says, '10:30 in the morning, sir.' We don't know who the woman is. We've never met her and are never likely to meet her, yet we trust her implicitly. We know by experience that sometimes they can be mistaken, but we trust her.

'If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater' (v. 9). God has only to speak and we ought to believe him.

⁴ See [p. 22](#).

⁵ Mrs. C. F. Alexander (1818-1895) 'There is a green hill far away' (1848).

And what is the testimony? What is God telling us? To translate it literally, it is this. 'God *has given* us eternal life.' Not *will* give it; *has* given it. 'That life is in his Son. He who has the Son has the life' (see vv. 11–12).

Suppose I put £50 inside this book that I'm holding. If the £50 were eternal life, and I said, 'The book will be on the piano and the gift of £50 is in the book. Whoever has the book has the £50.' If you wanted the £50, what would you do?

'I wouldn't like to go up and take the book with all these people watching,' someone says. 'Could I come back when everybody's gone, and if it's still there, get the book?'

If I asked you the moment you took the book, 'What have you got in that book?', you would say, 'A £50 note.'

'But how do you know?'

'The preacher said so.'

Simple logic, isn't it? 'Whoever that has the Son has the life.'

What if I were to ask your name, and you said, 'My name is Giles Parmenter'? Then somebody asks me, 'Gooding, what is that man's name?'. So I say, 'Well, he says it's Giles Parmenter, but that takes some believing! I don't think it would really be rational to believe it just because he said so, would it?'

And what would you say? Would you be inclined to say to me, 'Am I such a liar that you're not prepared to believe me when I tell you my name is Giles Parmenter?'

God is listening, my dear friends, at this very moment, and he is saying to us, 'I've given you eternal life, but it's in my Son. Do you have my Son as your Saviour? And if you do,' says God, 'he who has the Son has the life.'

What else can my own response be? I say, 'If those are the terms, God, as best I know how, I take your Son as my only hope for time and for eternity, and I have him as my personal and only Saviour to make meaning of life.' And God says that I have eternal life.

You don't believe it? You don't believe God? Then, as John says, you've made God a liar. My dear friend, think it out well. You couldn't live eternally in a heaven with a God you believe is a liar. It comes to our personal relationship with the almighty God, and a question of what we think of his character, and what we think of his Son.

Shall we pray?

Our Father, we pray that thou would look upon our study, and more upon our hearts as we have listened to thy word and thou hast read the emotions that run in our brains and in our hearts, and our reactions. By the grace of thy Holy Spirit, we pray that thou wilt authenticate thy word to us, to make us know thou art the living God, and how now we must make our decision whether to trust thee, or to reject thee and make of thee a liar. With such things hanging upon our decisions now, we pray thy grace as we conclude this time together. Look upon us, we beseech thee, and to those who have received thy Son, fill their hearts with the assurance of thy loyalty and thy truth, and the reality of thy salvation we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God is His Own Evidence

It is indeed for me a pleasure to be with you here again this evening and to attempt to answer questions that, as I understand it, were put largely by the young people associated with this church. Tonight, my topic is entitled 'God is his own evidence' and what that means I shall explain in a moment; but let's introduce ourselves to the topic by three brief readings from holy Scripture.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice [measuring line] goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. (Ps 19:1-9)

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom 10:17)

My title then for this evening's talk is 'God is his own evidence'. Perhaps, put just like that, it sounds a little strange to you, but I have devised the title against the background of many who say that faith in God is without any foundation in evidence. They contrast faith in what they call *religion* with science, and point out that in science you have established facts. Real, solid facts that the scientists have discovered by studying the universe around them. They discovered the principles upon which it works and then formulated them in scientific theories, and if they are eventually proved true by experience they are regarded as scientific knowledge. And so many people say, 'We prefer science to religion, because science is based on fact, whereas religion is altogether taken up with faith.' In their minds, faith is like the schoolboy who said, 'Faith is believing things that you know are not true.'

But of course that is not correct. All of us believe in many things that are not told us by science. Do you believe your mother loves you? Well, it's not science that told you that. Do you believe that the gentleman across the way, who's wanting to sell you something, is a reasonable fellow and liable to honour the faith and trust you put in him? It's not science

that told it to you either. We believe ten thousand things, because we say to ourselves, 'they are self-evident.'

In fact, our lives are made up of faith. You're going to work tomorrow? How do you know the sun is going to rise tomorrow?

'Well,' you say, 'it's done so for many thousands of years.'

That's no proof that it's going to rise tomorrow. If you are demanding absolute proof that the sun is going to rise tomorrow, it's no good quoting past experience. For philosophical proof, you'd have to go elsewhere, wouldn't you? And where else would you go? So you act in faith that tomorrow the sun is going to rise and you proceed about your daily work. We all believe ten thousand and one things, not because they have been proved to us by philosophical proof, but because in one sense that's the only way life becomes possible; to act in faith and because we think there is very good evidence for our faith.

So when I describe the title of my talk this evening as 'God is his own evidence', I'm saying that faith in God is not a leap in the dark. I find there are many folks who imagine that faith in God, faith in Jesus Christ, faith in religion, as they call it, is a leap in the dark. You have to decide to believe, without any evidence. That is not true. God has supplied us with abundant evidence for his existence, and asks for our faith on the basis of that evidence. And when it comes to trusting Jesus Christ our Lord, faith in Christ is not a leap in the dark.

The verse we read from the Gospel of John tells us 'these things are written—these signs, these miracles are recorded as evidence for you'. Evidence to call forth your faith, evidences solid enough for your faith. God does not require us to take a leap in the dark in order to trust his Son. God has provided abundant evidence.

Faith is based on evidence

When I say, 'God is his own evidence,' I mean finally this, that if you are ever going to be convinced, and not only convinced but to believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son, then it won't be because some preacher has persuaded you. It means that you will have to hear Christ himself talking to you through his word; because that third passage we read tells us how faith comes. It's not simply that we make up our mind that we're going to believe, come what may. 'Faith', we're told, 'comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ' (Rom 10:17).

You know there's nothing mysterious about that actually. I'm told, though I know very little about these things, that in the great cities of business, many a deal worth billions of money is concluded as a couple of businessmen discuss the deal and shake hands on it. At least that's how it used to be, and once they had shaken hands they regarded it as good as a legal settlement. To go back on that was a very serious misdemeanour.

How does a man come to trust another man? How does a woman trust a man to be her husband? How do they go about it? One of the ways a man will go about trusting another man is to listen to him talk and speak. Of course, you'll watch his behaviour pattern, and all his little knick-knacks of behaviour, his bodily language. As you listen to somebody you'll find yourself saying, 'he sounds to me like a reliable, genuine man.' Or perhaps you find the contrary. You say, 'It was a very clever scheme he put up to me, but there's something about him in the way he talks and the phrases he used. I think there's something suspect about him.' Faith, even in business circles, frequently comes by listening to somebody speak.

God's word says that faith in God, faith in Christ as our Saviour, comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. What I have to do tonight is to persuade you, if I possibly can, by God's help, to listen to Christ. Let him speak to you.

I once was at a meeting where a missionary gave a report of his work on the field. He had been a colourful character before he got converted. Then he had put his faith in Christ and very soon after he felt the inner compulsion to go and be a missionary in Italy. After he'd finished, I was wandering around in the lecture room and came across a good lady, who announced that she was the mother of this missionary, and she confided in me. 'They all tell me I need to get converted, but I just can't believe.'

What would you say to a person like that? My response would be, 'I dare say you can't believe, but if you want to believe, the first thing you'll have to start doing is to listen to Christ. Let him talk to you, for faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.'

The evidence of Creation

So then, God is his own evidence and God speaks to us. He has various books. The first mighty great part of the evidence that God puts in front of us is this universe around us. 'The heavens declare the glory of God,' says God's word (Ps 19). The universe around us is God speaking to us.

You say, 'But scientists have examined the universe and they don't need God to explain everything. They understand how everything works.'

Well, not quite everything yet, but they have found out how much of it works, and the principles it works on. They think they don't need God to explain anything. I hear that repeated time and time again on BBC Radio 4. As they interview this scientist and the other scientist, both of them are saying, 'We understand how the universe works and we don't need God to help us explain it.' But it's a false argument, isn't it?

Do you have a car? The last word of a BMW? It's a marvellous machine. Do you know what? If only I could master a little bit of car mechanics and studied hard, I could decide how it all works. I could lift the bonnet, look at the engine, poke a screwdriver in here and there, and generally see if it works this way or that way. I could come to understand how all that complicated system works, including its brain, if you please. What if I then decided that, now I understand how the thing works, I don't need to suppose there was anybody who designed it?

Would you say to me that, because I can understand how it works, I can dismiss the notion that somebody made it and designed it? You would say, 'No, that's a fallacy.'

And just because scientists can explain how the universe works, it doesn't mean that they are logically right to say that they don't need a designer behind the universe and a Creator who created it. Of course not. They're two different things, and even the scientists themselves admit it. There are two very big problems that science by definition cannot solve: where the universe came from, and the purpose behind it.

What would you say of me if I said, 'I can understand how your BMW works—I understand all the innards of it, I can describe it; I don't need to think that there was some designer who designed it'?

You would say, 'But do you know what the car is for?'

No.

'Why should I have a motorcar?'

I don't know.

'What's the purpose of it?'

I don't know.

'Knowing how it works is one thing; knowing what it's for is another. There are multitudes of people like me, who don't know how the thing works, but we know what it's for and how to make it go, and how to use it.'

When it comes to our universe and human life within it, science by definition cannot tell you the reason why you and I are on this planet, the reason for its existence and where it's all going to. These are the more important questions, aren't they? Not knowing how the car works, but knowing what it's for and where it's meant to be going.

Where shall we find the answer? We come back first of all to the universe itself, for the universe carries God's message to us. What can we know about God? He speaks in the universe around us and its message is spelled out in the New Testament:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom 1:20)

What message does it carry? 1. There is a God. 2. He is almighty. 3. He's a God of righteousness, and one day he will judge sin.

Let me use an inappropriate illustration. Suppose you read in the paper that a bomb went off in the middle of a city. The experts might tell you how the bomb worked: the terrorists used this chemical and the other chemical, and putting it all together with an electric something or other they managed to explode it in some thickly-populated part of the city. But you would want to ask another question, wouldn't you? What was the terrorist saying by it? Not even terrorists just plant bombs for the fun of it. They're making a statement, aren't they?

Do you know what God is saying by this universe? If you're a scientist you can understand how it works, but what is God saying by it? He's saying, 1. that this universe comes from a divine being who is not human, he is God; 2. he is almighty; and 3. he is a God of righteousness, who one day will hold us accountable for the way we have behaved in his universe.

There was a great philosopher in Europe in the 1700s and onwards. His name was Immanuel Kant. His work was so penetrating that he is still held in high regard in many places around this world. Why did he believe in God? He said,

Two things fill my mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the reflection dwells on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.⁶

⁶ *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). See also [p. 28](#) here.

Did you watch the moon going into an eclipse last night? I did, simply because I have an interest in astronomy. What a magnificent universe it is. Now that we understand how it works only makes it the more magnificent. When we understand a bit more about its size and the billions of galaxies that inhabit the universe, the more wonderful it becomes, and the more wonderful the almighty power of the Creator who made it.

If you say to me, 'But a lot of scientists don't believe in a God,' that is perfectly true, but there are some who do. Let me quote you what one of them says. I'm going to quote you the words of Paul Davies, a mathematical physicist. He is an atheist and an evolutionist. After all his examinations of this universe he says that it is rational, all the way down to metaphysics. What does he mean? If the universe is rational in the way it works all the way down and before it even began, there must have been a rational intelligence behind this universe. And Paul Davies is an atheist, if you please.

Then he observes this second point about our universe. The more we study the universe and how it works, the more beautiful it becomes. The mathematical laws that describe what makes the universe go are exceedingly beautiful and the laws the universe obeys are amazing. Professor Paul Davies expands upon this at great length, and then he adds what an astonishing fact it is, that we've evolved far enough with our little brains and we can turn round on the universe and understand how the thing works.⁷

Even I've begun. When I looked at the moon last night going into an eclipse, I understood that little bit. It's only a tiny bit, but I understand it. Thank God for science. In the old days when the moon went into an eclipse people didn't understand it. The women came out with the bin lids and bashed them on the ground, because they thought a spirit or a demon had got hold of the moon, and they were chasing a demon away.

Because of the precision of the mathematical laws that govern our sun and its planets, they can send a man to the moon and time it exactly. The universe acts according to mathematical laws, and the wonder is that we can understand them. It's amazing. So what does that lead Professor Davies to conclude? Remember that he's an atheist. His startling conclusion is that the universe is no minor by-product of mindless, purposeless forces, '*we are truly meant to be here*'.⁸

If I got the chance I should want to ask him what exactly he meant. 'You say, sir, we're meant to be here. Who meant us to be here?' Somebody did ask him once, 'Professor Davies, you must believe in God then?'

'No,' he said.

'Why not?'

'I don't like God; I don't like the idea of God.'

That's the secret, isn't it? We human beings are not unbiased. Deep within the human heart there's an antagonism against admitting that there is a God who made us. As the late Professor Lewontin said in one of his articles,

'we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how

⁷ See Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?* Penguin, 2007.

⁸ Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World*, Penguin, 1993.

counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.⁹

If you asked Professor Davies what was responsible for creating the universe, and us as well, he'd say, 'I hope it'll turn out to be some very clever mathematical laws.'

That is so laughable, you'd be inclined to laugh in his face, wouldn't you? If it were true that mathematical laws could create a universe, I'd get a bit of paper and work out the sum, ten times one million is ten million, as I understand it. And then I should take it down to the bank and say to the manager, 'Do you see this? It's a mathematical formula: ten times one million is ten million—now where is my money in your bank? Where is my ten million?'

He'd say, 'Don't be stupid, your mathematical formula can't produce anything.'

Why do scientists get such notions? Because they don't like God, and some of them are honest enough to say so. God speaks, and the universe itself is his message. When we listen to it, we need to be aware that God says he has given us this evidence so that we may be without excuse. There is a God then.

The evidence of Christ

God has not only spoken in creation, he has spoken supremely in the person of his dear Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

These are written [this is the evidence for you] so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ' (Rom 10:17).

So shall we not listen for a moment to some of the things Christ says?

Someone may say to me, 'You're now going to quote the Bible, I suppose? We don't believe the Bible.'

You don't believe it, so you're not prepared to read it? Is that what you say?

'What's the good of my reading it if I don't believe it's the inspired word of God?'

You read the daily newspaper and that certainly isn't the inspired of God, and you know a lot of what you read will be false. You nevertheless read it, because you're able to use your moral judgment on what is right and what is wrong.

When the great Apostle Paul went to preach in cities where he'd never preached before, such as in Athens (Acts 17), he didn't stand up in the marketplace and say, 'Now, the first thing you have to do is to admit that I'm an inspired apostle.' The Greeks would have given him funny looks. Of course he didn't say that. What did he do then? He just preached Christ, and as some of them listened to the words of Christ through the Apostle Paul they found those words true and came to believe that Paul was an inspired apostle and the word of God is true.

⁹ *The New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997: 'Billions and Billions of Demons' —Lewontin's review of Carl Sagan's book, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

Okay, you don't believe yet that the New Testament is the word of God, but do read it. Listen to Christ; let him talk to you. After all, he's the only man who ever walked our earth that is credibly regarded as being God incarnate. Will you not let him talk to you?

What will he say? On two occasions, he said to his contemporaries, '*I am the light of the world*' (John 8:12; 9:5)

Did I hear you say, 'Prove it'?

Well that's a very interesting idea. How do you prove that a light is a light? Have you ever tried? Suppose I brought you to my house and you'd not been in it before. It's pitch black when we enter and I say to you, 'I've a little switch just inside this door and all you have to do is to press it down and a light comes on.'

You say, 'I don't believe it.'

So I say, 'I'll have a go then,' and I press it and a light comes on. 'There you are; it has proved to me that it's a light.' Now what would you say?

'How could a man be so stupid as to say, "prove that's a light"? What is the proof? How do we know it's a light?'

Well we know it's a light because when the light comes on we see things that we didn't see before. Isn't that the evidence?

Christ says, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12).

The woman who was caught in the act of adultery

The story had just been told of how some of his critics brought to him a woman, who had been caught in the very act of adultery. They said, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?' (vv. 4-5).

But John the evangelist tells us that their question was not genuine; it was a trick question. They thought they could trick Christ, whatever way he answered. If he said, 'Yes, carry out the law of Moses and stone her,' they would have run down the road to Pilate, the governor, because it was illegal for Jews to execute anybody. And if he said, 'No, don't stone her,' they'd have gone to the people and said, 'There you are; he doesn't even believe the Bible, how can he be the Christ?' It was a trick question. They were not getting at her, but trying to discredit him.

When he heard their question he bowed down and wrote on the ground with his finger, and when he finished he lifted himself up, and said, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her' (v. 7). He bowed down to write on the ground the second time, and then an interesting thing happened. These accusers began to turn round, from the oldest down to the youngest, and they walked out.

As I read that story I, sort of, find myself getting involved in it. I think I'm there, and I say, 'Come back! By going away, you're admitting you're sinners. Stand in front of him and brazen it out.' Why didn't they? The fact is, if they had dared to try and brazen it out, he would have exposed them. He knew what was in man (2:25). Here was the light shining and it exposed them.

When we come near to Christ and read his word and let him start talking to us, sooner or later we shall find him true. He is the light of the world. We shall not need it proved; we shall see things about ourselves that were perhaps obscured before, or we had hidden. We shall discover we are sinners beside Christ. He is the light: that's why people don't like to get too near him.

I'm always glad that the woman stayed. She couldn't have run away. When he lifted himself up the second time, he said to her, 'Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord,' and he said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more' (vv. 10–11). He wasn't saying, of course, that adultery is okay. Everybody knew she was an adulteress. The question was, should the penalty be executed on her? And he said, 'No, I do not require the penalty to be exacted on you.' How could he say that and remain the judge of all mankind? Because a comparatively few months later, he was to go to the cross on Calvary and bear the penalty of that woman's sin, as he bore God's holy indignation against sin on her behalf so that she might be forgiven.

Will you let Christ speak to you? He claims to be the light. He will surely show us all our sinfulness, but what a wonderful light he brings into life. There's a way of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. There's a way that we can avoid the eternal penalty of our sin.

There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin;
 There's a door that is open and you may go in:
 At Calvary's cross is where you begin,
 When you come as a sinner to Jesus.¹⁰

What a light it is that floods the soul when, on the authority of Christ, we know ourselves forgiven and ready for God's heaven. 'I am the light of the world,' he said.

The man who had been born blind

He said it again in the very next chapter. If we pay attention to the text, we shall find him dealing with a very different kind of person. It is a physically blind man. He'd been born blind, and had never been able to see. Our Lord is the light of this world and the story is how he gave the man sight. It was a question of Christ creating the sight in him. You see, Christ is the light of this world. If a person is blind physically, he can't see the physical light, can he? And if a person is blind spiritually, he can't see the spiritual light. If this blind man was ever going to see, he would need Christ to do a miracle upon him and give him sight to see with. And that's what our Lord did.

Now I don't know if you've ever tried to describe what light is and what sight is to somebody who's been born blind.

You might say, 'I'm sorry you were born blind. That's terrible. What you do miss? If only you had sight, you'd be able to see colour.'

And the blind person says, 'What is colour?'

'Colour is like daffodils; they're yellow, you know.'

¹⁰ E. H. Swinstead (1882-1950).

It's a difficult thing to convince somebody who's been born blind that there is a thing called light, and to describe colour. How would you go about it? That's why many people who are spiritually blind, when they hear the gospel it seems foolishness to them. The Bible says it: 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor 1:18). How do you convince them it's true?

Our Lord came to the blind man, and we're told that he spat on the ground to make clay of the mud and put it on the man's eyes. He then told him to wash in one of the local pools and he would be able to see. It was called the Pool of Siloam. What would you have done if you had been that blind man? You've been sitting here begging all this long time, blind, and you've heard people talking about sight. You don't know what it is or what it means, and here comes this stranger with a proposal. He puts this stuff on your eyes, but you can't see what it is. He tells you to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash. Would you have gone?

I wonder what went on in the man's head when the proposal was made. Perhaps my imagination might be somewhere near correct. He had to ask himself, 'Who is this Jesus Christ? Is he a downright fool, a charlatan? Is he a showman at some showground? Is he trying to make money out of religion, or something? What am I to think of him?'

And Christ is saying to us tonight, saying to you maybe: 'I could give you spiritual sight. You would see clearly who I am; that I am God's own Son and I can give you eternal life.' Surely that will make you begin to decide, 'What am I to think of this Jesus? Can he do this?' Are you prepared to make a little *experiment*, if I may use that term?

You say, 'What kind of an experiment?'

Well, with this blind man, the Lord Jesus told him to go and wash in a pool called Siloam, and the evangelist John tells us what that name meant. It's not like the swimming baths situated down the Ormeau Road; it had a special meaning. Siloam, in Hebrew *Shiloach*, means 'the one who has been sent', and by this illustration our Lord was claiming before this man that he himself was the one sent by God, prophesied in the whole of the Old Testament. How could the blind man find out whether it was true or not?

There was one way. He could do the experiment that the Lord asked him to do and go to the Pool of Siloam and wash, and see what happens. He'd nothing to lose anyway, had he? Mercifully, he went, and he came seeing.

Would you be prepared to listen to Christ and do (let me use that odd word) an experiment? Christ will tell you that he is God's Son, the one sent from God, prophesied throughout centuries in the Old Testament, who was born of a virgin and came into our world to save sinners, to die, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28).

Would you be prepared to read what his word says, see if he speaks to you, and if he will do what he promises and gives you sight? Or do you think that Jesus Christ is a sheer deceiver? He's not worth listening to, and is fooling around with you? What do you think of Christ? How will you find him unless you now respond to him? If you've never had it before, he's offering you the gift of eternal life, the gift of spiritual sight, so that you will come to see that he is the Son of God, and that by believing you will have life in his name (John 20:31).

Who do you think Jesus is? Are you prepared at least to do the experiment? I told you about being in Jordan and reading Isaiah 53 to some Muslim friends.¹¹ Would you read it and then listen to what Christ says about it? How that he bore our sins in his body on the tree, and, if you will have it, he died as a ransom for your soul (1 Pet 2:24; Matt 20:28).

You'll have to decide about that. Faith will come by hearing God's word; but the only one who will ever talk to you like that is Jesus Christ. You'll only have to decide it once. There is no other in the whole of history, nor in the present day world, in any religion, that will come alongside you and say, 'I am your Creator. You have sinned, and like the rest of mankind you stand under the judgment of God. But I love you with a Creator's love, and to save you I died at Calvary on a cross, bearing in my body the sins of the world so that you might be forgiven.'

Reason, if nothing else, tells us that we shall have to make some response to what our Lord is saying. God help us to make the right response.

Shall we pray.

Father, we believe that thou hast been interested in the course of this session, and as we have read thy word and thought about it, and thy message to us men and women, we thank thee that thine eye has been upon us and thy Holy Spirit has been searching our hearts. Help us now, Lord, as we realize we must make some response to thee, that we might read thy word seriously and give thee opportunity to speak to us, if never before. Yet, in reading thy word, we might find that we become believers as faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. And those of us who have long since been believers, Lord, strengthen our faith as we read thy word and hold converse with thee as the days go by. So hear us and bless our meeting, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹¹ See [p. 21](#).

About the Author

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