**Explore God - Week 2 - Is There a God?**

**Teaching Team Notes**

**Intro: Letters to God (JF – 490)**

The notion of God or the idea of God is almost impossible to avoid… Trim this down

* His name is printed on the currency we once used to pay for stuff. (You remember what paper money looks like, don’t you?) We find the words: “In **God** we trust.”
* The pledge of allegience that most of us memorized when we were kids includes this phrase: “One nation under **God**.”
* ~~One of the new shows this Fall on CBS is “God Friended Me”~~
* Almost 90% of people say they believe in some kind of **god**. Need footnotes. Put stats on screen with sources.
* Over half say they believe in God as described in the Bible
* Nearly 60% of people say they pray every day. And I’m betting most of them would say they are praying to God.
* ~~Only one-in-ten Americans say they~~ **~~don’t~~** ~~believe in God or a higher power of any kind.~~

So I think we can all agree that almost everyone **thinks** about God or in one way or another **believes** in God. Even if we conlude that we do **not** believe, my hunch is that we still give the notion of god at least some thought from time to time.

And you know it’s not just adults who wrestle with the idea of God. Little kids think about God too. And sometimes their thoughts lead them to write letters to God. We were able to intercept some of these letters, and hear are a few of my favorites: On screen in kid handwriting?

* ~~Dear God, I read the Bible. What does “begat” mean? Nobody will tell me. - Love, Alison~~
* God, I bet it’s very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it. - Your friend, Frank
* Dear God, Are you really invisible, or is that just a trick? - Lucy
* ~~Here is one from Darla: “God, Did you really mean ‘Do unto others as they do unto you’? Because if you did, then I’m going to fix my brother.”~~
* And here is one of my favorites: “Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.” - Love, Larry

We can laugh at these letters from children with questions that will likely go unanswered, but if we’re honest with each other sometimes what makes God **less** than believable are the questions **we** have that often go unanswered. Questions like, “God, why do you allow so much pain and suffering?” Or “God, if you are real, why don’t you make it a little more obivious so we could clear up all this confusion once and for all?”

Have you ever asked one of those questions or a question similar? Maybe there is a nagging question you carry with you that leaves a few too many lingering doubts as to whether or not God is real.

**Series Recap (JF - 184)**

If you have been with us over the past several weeks, you know that we are joining with hundreds of churches in Chicagoland on a 7-week journey called **“Explore God.”** ~~You may have seen billboards in the area with the url exploregod.com or you may have seen an ad on Facebook or InstaGram or heard something about this journey on the radio.~~ And if this is your first-time here or if you just joined us during this series, we are so glad you came.

We want you to know that during these 7 weeks, we’re digging into 7 big questions many people have about God, faith, and life’s purpose. And our desire for these seven weeks is not so much to convince anyone of anything or to remove all your doubts, we just want to invite everyone to come together to explore these questions with us.

And today’s question is one that we may think we have a quick answer to, but I wonder if we’ve given it as much thought as we think we have. The question is this: **“Is there a God?”**

**Belief in God (JF – 369)**

As I mentioend earlier, 90% of Americans believe in some kind of higher power with over half of people survyed saying they believe in God as described in Scripture. Only 1 in 10 say they don’t believe in God or a higher power of any kind.

Sometimes those who deny the existence of God believe that educated people don’t believe, but many of history’s most influential intellectuals are convinced – they absolutely believe in the existence of God.

**Albert Einstein (pic with quote)**, one of the most highly recognized and revered scientists of the twentieth century was quoted as saying “Everyone who is seriously committed to the cultivation of science becomes convinced that in all the laws of the universe is manifest a spirit vastly superior to man, and to which we with our powers must feel humble.” ~~Another famous quote of his was “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”~~

It may be surprising to know that the English naturalist and geologist, **Charles Darwin** believed in God and believed there could be a relationship between faith and science. He said, “I have never denied the existence of God. I think the theory of evolution is fully compatible with faith in God. I think the greatest argument for the existence in God is the impossibility of demonstrating and understanding that the immense universe, sublime above all measure, and man were the result of chance.”

**~~Lise Meitner (pic) (pronounced “Leez Mite-ner”)~~** ~~was part of the team that discovered nuclear fission. Born in a Jewish family in Vienna, Meitner later converted to Christianity. She was only the second woman to achieve a doctorate in physics at the University of Vienna and the first woman professor of physics in Germany before she was forced to flee the country during WWII. Maybe not this one?~~

**Francis Collins (pic)** is an American [physician](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physician)-[geneticist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneticist) who discovered the genes associated with a number of diseases and led the [Human Genome Project](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Genome_Project). He is director of the [National Institutes of Health](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Institutes_of_Health) (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, United States. Here is how he describes his faith…

**VIDEO**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pl-fhLjz2Ac>

The bottom line is this: You did not check you brain at the door and you are not intellectually inept if you believe in the existence of God.

**Crisis of Belief (Jon H – 600/534 words)**

Now we could go on talking about famous people or smart people who believe in God. We could talk about arguments for the existence of God, and whether or not they “work” or are convincing one way or another, but at the end of the day, after all the evidence and the reasons, it has to go deeper than intellectual engagement. It still has to make sense of your experience, and sometimes you can find yourself grappling with this question in a way you don’t expect for reasons you don’t anticipate.

I *(Jon H)* remember a few years ago my wife and I had been stabbed in the back by some very good friends that were a part of our church. They hurt us and left the church, which hurt and confused a lot of people, but it was personally crushing for us. For months I couldn’t shake the deep feelings of rejection I was feeling, and I honestly started feeling like a failure. I would pray, and call out to God, asking for God to bring healing to my pain, but there was no answer, only hurt. Well, that year I came to church on Easter Sunday, the high holy day of the Christian calendar. I walked into the back of the auditorium from the lobby and the band was rocking, singing about the resurrection, but the message of hope and resurrection felt so foreign and impossible to me in my mind and in my heart. And I stood there taking it in, and then I said outloud to myself, “I don’t believe this anymore.” What do you do when you’re the pastor and you don’t believe the central event of your faith on the biggest Sunday of the year?

Now I could give you sophisticated philosophical and theological reasons for belief in God and why it’s reasonable intellectually; I had a master’s degree in philosophy and theology, but in that moment, none of that mattered. God didn’t seem real to me; his power seemed to be not all it gets made out to be. Maybe God doesn’t exist.

Maybe you know what I am talking about:

* For some of you God, seemed so real at one point in your life, but someone or something came along and devestated you and your life and your sense of self, and now God feels like a distant relative living on the other side of the planet.
* Or maybe you’ve been a part of a church, and you got burned by a friend, or a small group, or the leadership of the church, and if that’s what God’s people are like, you’d rather have nothing to do with them.
* Or maybe every version of God’s people you see on display seems so narrow-minded, petty, and arrogant, that you want nothing to do with the God of such repugnant people.

And if that’s been your experience or something similar, I don't blame you for feeling the way you do. But I’ll also confess that my experience is broader than that Easter morning. There are other moments in my life that point the other direction – moments of wonder that take my breathe away that point in some way to God.

**Signposts (JH – 900/965 Words)**

Let’s call these moments signposts. They point towards God. They don’t make an airtight case for the existence of God. I don't think there is a easy set of evidence for or against the existence of God, no matter what Youtube says. Rather, these sign posts nudge us or toward God, they resonate deeply within us; they point to something bigger than ourselves, and these signposts connect with the ancient, Christian story of God.

*For example~~.. The first~~ signpost that points beyond ourselves is the experience of* ***beauty****.*

N.T. Wright in his book Simply Christian says, “We must acknowledge that beauty, whether in the natural order or within human creation, is sometimes so powerful that it evokes our very deepest feelings of awe, wonder, gratitude, and reverence.”

We’ve all experienced these moments. If we are willing to pause long enough to take in the world around us, we are struck by the awe and wonder of the world. Last summer my family went up to Door County, and we watched the sunset at Peninsula State Park. Need picture. We sat on the rock beach and watched the waves pound the shore and the sun sink into the lake. It stirred something in me, and I took pictures. I’ve experienced this same stirring when reading poetry or a grand piece of writing or eating a fantastic meal. We use words like sublime, divine, or transcendent to describe our experience.

Maybe cut this ~~Dostoyevsky was famous for saying, “Beauty will save us!” and indeed it feels like it can when we share a sunset beach with random strangers brought together in awe of the world, except for the fact that the sunset fades, and the pictures can’t contain the moment, they can only remind us of it.~~

This has led many to think that beauty points us to a divine artist, a mind who has created and orcheastrated a good, ordered, and beautiful world. One poem from the Old Testament reads this way.

**The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his**

**hands. –Psalm 19:1**

Beauty calls us out of ourselves to something bigger, and it also resonates deeply within us, and the Christian story is that at the heart of the universe is the Beautiful One.

*The second signpost that points beyond ourselves is our longing for* ***justice****.*

Travel to the nearest playground and you’ll hear children caling out, “that’s not fair!” because a sense of fairness and justice is part of being human, and we feel a longing for the world to be put right. We all know the world is not as it should be, There is plenty that puts the beauty of God at risk that like a child with a broken leg, our world needs to be set right, to be fixed, the bone needs to be set and given time to heal.

You’ve undoubtedly experienced this if you’ve:

* Been to a third world country and seen people living in extreme poverty. A few years ago I was in a city in Mexico, and we went to the “Cardboard City” where people lived in the garbage dump of the world. Their homes we made of billboards and scrap metal. Their sewer was an open ditch, and their kids ran naked through the dirt streets. In that moment I didn’t have words, except to say, “This isn’t the way the world is supposed to be.
* Maybe you’ve felt this way when you turned on the TV and heard about a shooting or a stabbing, or systematic violence committed against a people group because of their gender, or their political, or religious views. It’s not right, and we feel in our bones, someone needs to do something!

On screen C.S. Lewis, one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century said, “Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it.” He believed there are moral facts in the universe – that there aren’t civilizations where betrayer ~~stabbing~~ your friends in the back and lying to family is a moral virtue, and that this moral order points to a “source of morality.” phrase? moral law giver – to God, who is concerned with justice and wants his people to be concerned with justice and fairness.

Now I know some of you may be thinking, “Christians have done their fair share of horrible acts in the world,” and you’d be right. All of us have the capacity for great evil no matter what we believe, but we also have the capacity for good, and followers of Jesus have and still make waves in the world for fairness and justice.

*The last signpost pointing beyond ourselves is our desire for* ***relationships****.*

We all long to be in healthy, meaningful relationships, and even when they are difficult and we want to go stomping out into the night swearing off the people around us, we still want someone there in that moment to have pity on us. We are made for relationships, and our experience of relationships point again toward God.

* Maybe you’ve experienced this at the birth of a child.
* On a wedding day
* Or maybe sitting around a table with some good friends where you connected beyond surface level conversation, but talked about your hopes and fears.

That other night I was wrestling with my eight year old boy, and in that moment it’s like nothing else matters in the world, and this little child is so precious and full of dignity and life. He’s not just a collection of chemicals and brain synapses, but he’s a glorious human being capable of giving and receiving love. Do you know what I mean?

Relationships point back towards a God who is the definition of love. The earliest Christian believed this is what Jesus revelead about God, Do we want to talk about Trinity in here, God in relationships. that ***God is love. 1 John 4:8***

**Creative Moment: Treble and Bass (JF – 190)**

Whether you believe in God or not, we likely all have those moments where something just resonates deeply within us. Beauty, justice, relationships - when we see these things lived out, or better yet - when we experience them ourselves, there's something in our gut that points to that and thinks, "There's something powerful going on there."

It's a little bit like this. In music, there is treble, which are tones of high frequency or range and its counterpart is bass – the lower, deeper tones. In our culture, we're surrounded by a lot of "treble" - social media, advertising, entertainment - things fighting for our attention. Amidst that sea of noise, I think a lot of us, deep down, long for a bass note - something that resonates deep within us.

Have you ever been to a concert and the bass was cranked all the way to 11? I think that's sometimes how God works. He's not merely something to learn about or even just talk about, but something to experience, deep down, like a bass note. This longing, whether we recognize it or not, is in all of us.

(From Ian: \*Also, Jeff is the one that relayed the idea in BIF meeting since I wasn't able to be there. I would not recommend using a bass player on stage, but instead creating/engineering a specific track to be used in the service.)

**Challenge: Pascal’s Wager as a Community (JF – 316)**

Let me say again that in this series we are not really trying to **convince** you, we are simply asking you to join us, as together we explore these all important quesitons of life and faith. But I want to push you just a little bit because I believe this is the most important journey or exploration you will ever undertake. And here is the challenge: Take this journey **with** us, a community of fellow pilgrims who are on a similar exploration simply seeking to find our way back to God. Join us every week for the next five weeks. Consider joining a small group where you can go deeper, ask questions, and be encouraged by other fellow explorers. And for sure don’t miss next week as we ask the question: **“Why does God allow pain and suffering?”**

Last week we introduced Pascal’s Wager and we challenged everyone of us to individually pray a prayer. Maybe remind people of that prayer. Today, I want to challenge everyone to pray this prayer **together** as a community. And the prayer is this: **God if you are real, make yourself real to US.**

Make this more concise The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal had one of the greatest intellects in the history of Western civilization. He grew up knowing about God, but NOT earnestly following him. Then, in a profound middle-of-the-night experience with God, he had a change of heart. That experience ignited Pascal’s passion to help others find their way back to God.

Pascal began to challenge his fellow intellectuals to a wager on God. He would dare them to step into a belief about God and see if it didn’t change their lives. Pascal explained his wager this way: “Make a bet that there is a God who loves you. If you are right you have everything to gain, and if you are wrong you have nothing to lose. Make a bet that God is real.”

**Conclusion and Communion (JF – 261)**

I’m going to ask the band to come up and begin to prepare us for our communion time. Communion is a tremendous reminder of lengths to which this God would go to make himself real to us. His one and only son, Jesus, became so real he left heaven to become one of us. One of his closest friends and followers, John, put it like this: ***“He moved into the neighborhood . . .”*** *(John 1)*he lived with and among us. He saw life like we see it. He felt feelings like we feel them. He cried tears like we cry them. And then he willingly sacrificed his life – experiencing untold pain and suffering in order to give us the hope of grace, forgiveness, and an eternity with him that begins the moment we put our trust in him.

Then to make sure we wouldn’t forget him and to keep on making himself real, he put his spirit inside each of us who choose to follow him and asked us to remember him by participating in a very real and simple meal each week we call the Communion Lord’s Supper or Eucharist.

In a moment we will celebrate the Communion Lord’s Supper together as a community, but before we do I want us to prayerfully say these words to God together: **“God if you are real, make yourself real to us.”**

I will say a few words of a prayer and then I want all of us to repeat this prayer after me together: “God if you are real, make yourself real to us.”

**Let’s pray.**

* Another option for this section is this story we used back in the Tug of War series: I thought of a story I once heard about a woman named Agnes. From the time she was a young girl, Agnes believed. Not just believed—she was passionate about following God. She wanted to do great things for God. She knew Jesus was with her and had an undeniable sense of his calling on her life. She left her home, became a missionary, committed everything to God. And then God left her. At least, that is how it felt to her. “Where is my faith?” she wondered. “Deep down there is nothing but emptiness and darkness,” she wrote. “My God, how painful is this unknown pain.”On the outside she continued to work, to serve, to smile. She chose to trust Jesus and walk by faith even though she struggled to feel it. This inner darkness and dryness and pain over the absence of God continued on, year after year, with one brief respite, for nearly fifty years. Such was the secret pain of Agnes, who you probably know better by another name…Mother Teresa.