

"Reason to Believe: Classic Arguments for God"

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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1 Peter 3:13-18

If you read books on apologetics, or watch videos online, you soon realize that most of what you read and most of what you see is aimed at other Christians. These books and videos are written by Christians, for Christians. They are written to help believers deal with their own doubts and questions. Of course these doubts and questions often arise because of things outsiders have said, but the words aren't aimed at those outsiders. They're for us.

There's nothing wrong with that, but it's worth noting that 1 Peter pushes in a slightly different direction. 1 Peter calls us to "always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." These people asking for reasons are not fellow church members; these are outsiders. Sometimes these are hostile outsiders who "speak maliciously" against our faith (to use Peter's words). In this sermon series, we are considering reasons to believe. Those reasons aren't just for each other; they are also for the world. And that's not just something 1 Peter 3 suggests, this call has deep Scriptural roots. We read part of Psalm 96 a moment ago. In that well-loved Psalm, the Psalmist calls us to praise the Lord, but he doesn't want this praise to be confined to the temple or to the streets of Jerusalem, "Declare God's glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among the peoples!" Say among the nations, the Lord reigns!" Our worship and our theology is meant to be overheard by the rest of the world, and sometimes not just overheard, but addressed to the rest of the world. This outward facing testimony is at the heart of Israel's purpose. God has always wanted our testimony and our lives to be for the world. In Genesis 12 God tells Abraham that 'all the nations of the world will be blessed through you.' Our words aren't just for each other; they are for the world. Increasingly, there are times when we have opportunity or when we have need to defend our faith publicly. West Michigan is a pretty faith friendly place, so it doesn't happen as much here, but leave the friendly confines of our little bubble, and you will get questions. My son went off to the University of Chicago last year to start a graduate science program there. He loves it. It's a great school with great teachers. And there are many people there who are devout believers and lots of people who respect religious faith. But there are also people who don't expect reasonable people to be religious believers. One day he was out at a restaurant with some of his friends and it came up that he was a Christian. His students assumed he'd misspoke and tried to correct him. "You mean your parents are Christians," they said. "No," he said, "Me. I'm a Christian." They didn't know what to say to that. They didn't expect to find faith in a reasonable person. Of course, sometimes the challenge is close to home. Many of us have family members, cousins, siblings, children who don't believe. They sometimes confront us with the reasons why they no longer believe. And many of us wonder how we should speak to them.

With 1 Peter as our guide I would like to suggest how to defend our faith to the outside world, and I would also like to talk about what we might say, some of the reasons we might give for the hope that is within us. So how and what. Peter is pretty specific about the how. Even if the outsiders the unbelievers attack you, even if they speak maliciously, even if they slander you (as verse 17 says), you should respond to them with gentleness and respect. That's what verse 16 says and it's a strategy backed up by Peter's entire letter. Through the whole letter Peter says, "you believers should expect hostility from the people around you. You should expect to suffer." And throughout the letter, Peter consistently calls them to respond with gentleness and respect.

Peter recommends repaying evil with blessing and living such good lives among the unbelievers that they see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven. Our public intellectual engagements-and this goes for theology or politics or anything-must be gentle and respectful. When we engage our opponents they should have a sense that we care about them. They should have a sense that we love them.

Peter's advice reminds me of what the rest of the New Testament calls us when we engage the world. We are witnesses. When we give the reasons for the hope within us, we do it as witnesses. We are not prosecuting attorneys, trying to put the other person on trial and defeat them with our amazing arguments, we are witnesses. In most of our public engagements, we want to be prosecuting attorneys. We imagine ourselves as prosecuting attorneys. When someone on the internet, or someone on TV makes a hostile comment, when they speak maliciously against what we believe, what do we want to do? We want to hit back. We want to hit them with a devastating truth bomb. We want to have a Perry Mason moment where the whole courtroom sees that we are right and they are humiliated. That's NOT Peter's way. In Peter's way, you speak up, but you do it with gentleness and respect. You speak up in such a way that the person you are engaging feels like you care about them. We are witnesses. But Peter, what if they don't respond to your gentle witness! What if they start to restrict you and come against you? What if you feel yourself losing social power?! What if the other side starts to win the culture war? Here's Peter's response: "It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." Don't worry so much about winning. Jesus will take care of the winning. We worry about picking up our cross and following His path. Jesus is Lord and every knee will bow, but the path to that is gentleness and respect and cross-shaped love.

So, that's how we witness to the world, how we engage our opponents. Now I'd like to finish with what we say when we engage our opponents. What I will share in conclusion are some of the classic arguments that show that faith in God is reasonable. These arguments don't prove that God exists. That is not something you can prove. But they do show that following Jesus and believing in God is reasonable. Sometimes you will hear people say, 'I can't believe in God because I'm a person who follows reason. I don't just believe things without evidence. Reasonable people shouldn't believe anything without proof!' That's a kind of thinking that needs to be challenged with gentleness and respect. When it comes to foundational beliefs, we all live by faith. Push someone to explain their worldview, and they will eventually get to the point where they say, 'That's just what I believe.'

So let me lay out for you, with gentleness and respect, three classic arguments for the existence of God. The first argument called the argument from design. Christian thinkers have always pointed to the remarkable structure of the universe as evidence for God. The world is so beautifully and elegantly constructed! There must be a designer! A compelling modern version of this argument points to the fine-tuning of the universe. There are certain physical constants that exist in the universe. Physical constants like the speed of light, the gravitational constant, and the strength of the strong and weak nuclear forces. Imagine these constants like dials on an appliance set to a certain position. The setting of these dials governs the way the universe runs. For the purpose of this argument, you don't have to understand exactly what these dials do, all you need to know is that if even one of these dials were even microscopically tweaked, there is no way life could have existed. Even the most microscopic change in the gravitational constant and there is no way life would happen. Scientists have calculated that the odds of all these dials

would be set so precisely as to allow for life is one in a billion trillions. Not one in a trillion. One in a billion trillions.

When something so unusual happens, it's extremely reasonable to assume that it wasn't an accident. Tim Keller uses this analogy. If a firing squad of ten expert marksmen were charged with executing a criminal, but at the moment of execution they all missed even though they were only standing 10 feet away, you might think it was a coincidence, you couldn't prove it wasn't a coincidence, but wouldn't it be MORE reasonable to assume that they missed by design? In the same way, we look at the fine tuning of the universe and say "Hmm. Looks like this happened on purpose." Of course, unbelievers have an explanation for fine tuning. They suggest the multiverse. Physicists speculate that our universe isn't the only universe. They speculate that there are an infinite number of parallel universes. A billion trillion of them, and we just happen to be living in the one where the dials are set for life. Well, that's an interesting idea, but is the multiverse something you can prove? No. It's an article of faith. It's highly speculative, and I would gently and respectfully ask, "Is believing in an infinite number of parallel universes any more reasonable, any more believable than faith in God?"

A second argument for God is the argument from beauty. The existence of beautiful things and our response to them is evidence for the existence of God. Why do human beings have such strong reactions to a beautiful piece of music, or to a gorgeous spring garden? Why do we all love sunsets and mountain scenes? Why do we all love the way sunlight sparkles on water? If human beings are just survival machines, why do we respond to beauty? Beauty is so important to us, and yet it doesn't contribute to our survival. As a Christian, I believe beauty is our response to the creator's handiwork. God has made things beautiful so that our souls awake to His goodness and His glory. Beauty is God's signature on the canvas of creation. The very existence of art and beauty is a sign that we are not walking pork chops! We are creatures with souls! We are made for fellowship with a glorious and beautiful God.

Again, unbelievers see that beauty is hard to fit into their survival paradigm, so they have their own theory about why we respond to beauty. I once read an article-sorry I couldn't find it this week-that suggested that the reason we think paintings and photos of big landscapes beautiful is because open spaces are safer. Open spaces allow us to see predators more clearly. They are also better for hunting. You can find food sources more easily in an open space. In *Making Sense of God*, Tim Keller says, "a common scientific explanation of the human desire for beauty is that our ancestors came to recognize certain landscapes as beautiful because it alerted them to the prospect of food." Well...that's a possible explanation. But it's certainly not provable. If you believe that, you believe it by faith, not because it's proven. And as an explanation it suffers from a couple of weaknesses. First, when I see something beautiful, I don't get hungry. I don't have a response that has to do with food. I feel lifted up in a way that seems to go beyond the things of this world. I feel the stirrings of eternity in my heart. And second, I don't just respond to fruitful landscapes. I think the desert southwest is beautiful. In fact, I think it's gorgeous! A picture of a blue wall of arctic ice against a grey sea is also beautiful. I think pictures from the top of Mount Everest are beautiful, but there's no food there. So you have your explanation for beauty, but with gentleness and respect I think that my beauty response is my soul catching the sense of God's work. I think beauty is the stirring of eternity in my heart.

One more example. This is something I've mentioned in a previous sermon, but I'd like to touch on more deeply here. Christians have long argued that our moral sense-humanity's universal sense of right and wrong-is a sign of the existence of God. That's where C.S. Lewis starts in the book *Mere Christianity*. One aspect of this argument is the existence of human

rights. All people want to say that humans have rights. All people want to say that all people should be treated with dignity. Everyone wants to say that torture and slavery are wrong. But where do those universal human rights come from? Christians say that they come from God. The Bible tells us that God created human beings in his image. Human beings have rights because they are made in God's image. Secular unbelievers want to affirm these same human rights, but they struggle to explain why humans should have rights.

Allan Dershowitz, an atheist, wrote an essay called "*Where do Human Rights Come From?*" and he said there are three possible sources. ¹They could be created by God. That's our belief. Dershowitz doesn't like that explanation because he's an atheist. Second possibility: they could be socially constructed. Different cultures could have created the idea of human rights as a way to bring order to society. Dershowitz doesn't like that explanation either because that means human rights aren't universal, they're a creation of certain cultures. We Americans have human rights, but if the Chinese government for example, wants to force its citizens to have abortions against their will, we may not like it, but we can't blame them for violating human rights because human rights are our thing. The Chinese government can say, "We have different values than you! Stop forcing your values on us!" Allan ends up choosing a third option. Human rights are universal! They apply to every culture. We can call every human government and every human institution to respect human rights because they are universal. We don't know where they come from, they just exist. We don't know why they're universal, they just are. I don't think I need to tell you that Dershowitz does not prove the existence of human rights; he accepts them on faith. Well Allan, I am glad you believe in human rights! I share that belief. But, with gentleness and respect let me say, I think it goes deeper than that. I think it's more wonderful than that. I believe that these rights exist because they are rooted in the heart of God who loves the world, who hears the cry of the weak, who wants justice for the oppressed, and who made every human being in His image.

We don't have to be intellectually ashamed of our beliefs. We can stand in any place of learning or any place of power or any place of influence, and with gentleness and respect, with care in our heart and the Spirit underneath us, we can give reasons for the hope that is within us.

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¹ Cited in Tim Keller's Reason for God, pages 150-151