

Is There a God?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 October 2023

Preacher: Rev. Andrew Ong

[0 : 00] We hope that you enjoy this teaching from Christ Church. This material is copyrighted and no unauthorized duplication, redistribution, or any other use of any part is permitted without prior consent from Christ Church.

Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is taken from the book of Genesis, chapter 1, the Gospel of John, chapter 1, and the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 1, all as printed in the liturgy. A reading from the book of Genesis. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty. Today, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, Let there be light. And there was light. Then God said, Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

[1 : 34] A reading from the Gospel according to John. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made.

Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, To those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

A reading from the Epistle to the Romans. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

[2 : 44] For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator, who is forever praised.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, thank you, Michael, for that scripture reading. And good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here. And will you join me in prayer as we open up God's word together?

Father, I just ask that you would reveal yourself to us, open our eyes to see your truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And would we find that your truth is not only true, but that it is beautiful as revealed in Jesus Christ.

[3 : 57] We pray this in his name. Amen. All right, so let's do this. Is there a God? Right? Yes. We're done. Now, you probably don't need to guess my answer to this question.

Look at my outfit, right? But the first thing that I want to say is that if you're here, and your answer to this question, is there a God, is no, or maybe, or I'm not sure, we want to especially thank you for being here.

And we want to acknowledge that just by stepping into this church, you've already taken a huge step of faith. You've taken a step into this church in faith that this is not going to be a complete waste of your time.

So we're super honored that you're here, and we want you to know that Christ's church exists not just for Christians, but for people just like you. The second thing I want to say is that if you consider yourself as someone who doesn't believe in God, or if you struggle to believe in God, I want to say to you that, you know, we Christians actually might agree with you more than you think.

Because, you know, it's actually quite possible that the God you don't believe in truly doesn't exist, and isn't worthy of your faith and trust. And it might be that that's also not the God that we believe in either.

[5 : 09] Here at Christ's church, we recognize that a big reason people don't believe in God is because they haven't beheld Him for who He really is. So we welcome your skepticism, we welcome your questions, we hope that you'll join us in our Q&A; after this.

And really, our only hope for you is that you'd be introduced to the God that we believe truly is worthy of believing in. And we believe that that God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

So that's what we're going to be talking about today as we approach this question, is there a God? We're specifically asking, does the Christian God exist? Now, maybe you're expecting the sermon to go something like this.

Yes, there is a God because, argument one, two, three, and four, or however many I can throw at you in the next 30 minutes, right? And honestly, I could preach that sermon in probably less than two minutes, right?

Like, check this out. Yes, there is a God because, point one, where did all this come from, if not from a divine first cause? Point two, how else could we account for the fine-tuning of this universe and how intricately this world is sustained and held together?

[6 : 10] And what is the probability that this world is ordered this way just by chance? Point three, how else could we ground the transcendent and universal nature of morality and justice apart from a transcendent God?

And then point four, if there is no God, and if this is all there is, and the universe is just an impersonal chunk of matter, why do our lives feel like they're stories full of meaning?

Why do our interactions feel so personal rather than mechanical or robotic? And what is beauty? And why does human love and consciousness seem like something more than just a biochemical reaction?

And there we go, my four-point sermon. We can go home. But, you know, while I do personally find these arguments compelling, compelling signals indicating God's existence, I know that they don't definitively prove God, like, beyond all doubt.

In fact, if we're talking about the Christian God, I'll be the first to admit that we can't prove this God because He is not a God that we can prove or disprove. If you tried to prove God at the very start, appealing to some more certain, more authoritative, more trustworthy, more reliable proof of God, you've already begun looking for something greater than God.

[7 : 24] And so from the start, you'd be trying to prove an inherently inferior being whose own word and revelation were not authoritative enough to verify His own existence. And again, this would not be the Christian God.

So as circular as this may be, at the end of the day, I believe that there is a God because God has revealed Himself to us as self-evident. And there is no higher or more reliable authority than God's own testimony and communication concerning Himself.

But now if you're here, I'm sure you don't buy that, right? Maybe you think I'm crazy. Maybe you think I'm deluded or just incredibly narrow-minded, right? And unable to see from any other

perspective than my own Christian one to say something like this.

And maybe your fair and logical question to me is, well, if God is self-evident, then why do so many people not believe in God? And why are we asking this question, is there a God?

Well, that's the question that I really want to consider this morning. Why do we ask this question, is there a God? Have you ever given any thought to that? Like, why do we ask, is there a God?

[8 : 31] Now, the modern secular person might say it's because God is not self-evident, right? Because if He was, then everyone, right, everyone would believe in Him.

But they don't, so He must not be self-evident. And that seems like pretty sound reasoning, right? But isn't it possible that something self-evident might still be denied and rejected as false, even if it was true?

Like, is it truly self-evident that all people are created equal? Yes? Well, if so, then why weren't people treated equal on the southern plantations or in the Nazi internment camps?

It is very possible. It is very possible for something to be self-evident and yet not believed. Whether people are blinded from seeing the truth as victims of some kind of evil Nazi propaganda or people can just deny self-evident truths out of their own wicked and deceitful motivations, right?

Like so many of our early founding fathers who did believe that all people were created equal and yet they found ways to justify slavery because they loved money and power and comfort more than truth.

[9 : 42] So I want to question and I want to problematize this assumption that God's existence must not be self-evident. And I want to suggest that there are other explanations for why we ask this question, is there a God?

Because, you know, for the majority of humanity throughout history, divine existence has been considered as self-evident. And the Christian scriptures would agree. Look at verses 19 and 20 of our Romans passage.

Apostle Paul says what can be known about God is plain, like it's self-evident because God has made it plain to us and his divine qualities have been clearly seen and therefore we are without excuse.

So Christians, along with a sizable majority of people throughout history, have considered God's existence to be self-evident. And of course, this doesn't make us right about the matter, but I do wonder if this should factor into how we talk about who should bear the burden of proof in this matter.

You know, there's this one time, a long time ago, I'm not even sure if I was married yet, but I was interacting with my wife, Chelsea, and I wanted to test her. And I said, hey Chelsea, why do you believe in God?

[10 : 53] And I expected that she was going to give me a bunch of different reasons, and I planned to play devil's advocate, right? And to critique her and to use that moment to teach her all the stuff I learned in seminary.

But to my surprise, she hit me with something that I didn't at all expect. And she totally stopped me in my tracks. So I'm like, hey Chelsea, why do you believe in God?

And then she looked at me, annoyed, as you've often seen her look at me. She rolled her eyes, and she said, why not? And then she just went on carrying on with her own business, leaving me dazed and hemming and hawing all to myself.

Now I share this story not just to give you a pretty representative window into my marriage, but to help us see that a big part of how we come at this question, is there a God, has to do with where we think the burden of proof lies.

Like I tried to place the burden of proof on Chelsea to support why she believed in God, but then she flipped it back on me to make a case for why she shouldn't. And in the same way, I want us to consider, why are we even asking the question, is there a God?

[12 : 02] Why aren't we asking instead, is there not a God? Now this is not to say that is there a God is a bad question or a wrong question, but it is to note that it's a question that comes from a particular historical context and background.

Right? Like did you know that in the Western world, atheism didn't really come onto the scene as a compelling like option until the late 1800s. So it's worth asking, as the philosopher Charles Taylor does in his massive book, *A Secular Age*, why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God and say 1500 in our Western society?

Why? While in 2000, many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable. Now that question is way above my pay grade. And even if I could answer it, we don't have time.

But my point is, when we ask, is there a God rather than, is there not a God? It might actually reveal far more about us than it does about whether or not God exists.

When we ask, is there a God, we display our own cultural and historical conditioning and situatedness and the background beliefs that come with being modern, secular people. Because we see, according to the Christian account of world history, the first humans, Adam and Eve, especially before they began to doubt God's word, they would never have even thought to ask such a question as, is there a God?

[13 : 25] Even when Adam and Eve experienced God's divine absence, right? God came into the garden, then he went out of the garden. They experienced his divine absence, but they never doubted his existence. And then even after the fall of humanity, when we began to doubt God and his words, no one, no one doubted his existence.

Even when they stopped going for walks with God in the garden, virtually all of the ancient world, even those who didn't worship the same God as Abraham. Moses and Adam. For them, doubting the divine just wasn't plausible in the ancient world.

And even when they experienced long bouts of divine absence, right? They didn't doubt the divine, but they actually pined for the divine presence all the more.

All the more, right? But here we are as modern Western people, and we hold the background belief that God isn't self-evident. That God's existence is up for debate, and that it's acceptable to doubt him.

And probably our biggest obstacle to belief in God is the problem of evil and suffering, right? Like, how could God allow it? And why hasn't he given us an explanation for evil and suffering? Because we moderns, right?

[14 : 38] Because we moderns are so confident that we can understand so much of the universe and how it works, it's hard for us to believe in a God that we can't fully grasp and explain. And so, like, if I can't think of a reason why God would allow pain and suffering, then there must not be a reason, and God must not exist.

But for pre-modern people, who probably suffered, like, far worse than any of us, it was like, of course we can't understand everything that God allows to happen.

And suffering actually drew them nearer to God than further. Because after all, if we have a God big enough to be mad at, because he's all, you know, he's all powerful and he's all wise, if we have a God that's big enough to be mad at, that he doesn't fix things, then we probably also have a God big enough to have some reasons why he doesn't fix things, reasons that we just might not yet know as finite creatures.

So what I'm saying is, sure, we can ask, is there a God, but why do we ask? And might it be that we ask not so much because God's existence is clearly implausible, but because we live in an age that has suppressed the truth and made God's existence implausible?

Now, I'm not saying that modern Western people are any worse than the people of any other time. But I do want to point out that we aren't as neutral as we like to think we are.

[16 : 01] And we do have blind spots. And our particular blind spot is that since Descartes, right, since the Enlightenment, we've been conditioned to pursue truth and certainty, not by faith in God who reveals things to us, but by doubt.

Think about that. We've been conditioned to pursue certainty through the method of skepticism. We've been taught to doubt everything and doubt as much as you can. And at the point in which you cannot doubt anymore, then you finally arrived at certainty and truth.

And that's what Descartes did, right? He doubted and doubted and doubted until he realized, I think, therefore, I am. Or in other words, I can know that I exist because I'm thinking.

And I could not think unless I existed. So I am certain that I exist because I am thinking. Descartes believed his doubting led to certain knowledge. And we've been influenced by this method ever since, using skepticism and doubt to discern and discover the truth.

But the thing is, you know, Descartes, honestly, he could have doubted some more. He could have. We can always keep doubting if we want to. There are no limits to skepticism. Sure, I believe my wife loves me.

[17 : 09] I believe she's a mortgage loan processor and a real estate agent. But how do I really know that she's not a Chinese spy? Plotting my demise.

I could always doubt if I wanted to. But none of us lives that way, right? None of us lives that way as absolute skeptics because it's impossible to live that way.

When you sat down in these pews today, you didn't research the tree that this wood came from. You didn't try to discern how old the wood was. Or you didn't measure the thickness of the pew and calculate the physics relative to your body weight.

No, you just sat in it, all right? You trusted the pew would support you. None of us can live a life of radical doubt and skepticism. For as C.S. Lewis would caution us, the one who sees through everything sees nothing.

We all live with implicit faith. And even when we doubt, it takes faith to doubt. You know, we tend to often think of faith as a blind leap and of doubt as honest.

[18:11] But there is such a thing as a reasonable faith. And there is also such a thing as blind, irrational, and dishonest doubt. Whatever we believe to be true or whoever we believe to be telling the truth, we always believe with a measure of faith.

Or to put it differently, we believe things to be true by some measure of trust. Trust. All knowledge of anything requires trust. Every time we push on the brakes in our cars, right?

We don't just know that the car is going to stop. We trust that the car is going to stop. Or as the Scottish philosopher David Hume would famously remind us, when we anticipate the sun rising once again tomorrow, as it has ever since we've ever known a bazillion times, because we still can only trust and believe by faith that it's going to rise again tomorrow.

Everything we say we know, we actually trust that we know it. We know by at least a small measure of faith. So when it comes to the question of is there a God, whether we answer yes or no or maybe, every answer, every answer requires faith.

Prior assumptions and commitments that we do not doubt but also cannot prove. Now you may be wondering, if all knowledge then requires a measure of faith, and if none of us are as neutral or unbiased as we like to think, am I saying that we're all just stuck in this chaotic and subjective world of competing, he said, she said, they said, we said?

[19:40] Well, no, let me be very clear. It is because I believe, our text this morning, Genesis chapter 1, that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. It is because of my faith in this God that I also believe in objective and absolute truth, that all truth is God's truth, and that therefore all truth is also public truth, universal truth, because this world belongs to a God who's holding it all together.

And even though we are fallible and finite, I also believe we can know objective, public, and universal truths because God made us in His image and in His likeness. And He wants us to know Him, and He wants us to know ourselves, and He wants us to know the rest of His creation.

But you see, it is precisely because of my faith that I can account for an objective world. In fact, you know, even when Francis Bacon was articulating the scientific method, he wasn't doing that in a vacuum.

He was a committed Christian. He developed a scientific method based on his faith in a God who ordered and sustains the universe. So you see, Christians, we very much affirm truth as objective, even as we also recognize that there's always a subjective measure of faith and trust involved, as with everything we claim to know and live by.

When God spoke to Adam and Eve in person, telling them how to live and what to do and what not to do, they were to live and they were to obey by faith and trust in God's Word to them.

[21:10] Just because they saw God face to face didn't mean that they didn't have to have faith in Him. But see, their faith, it wasn't a huge blind leap of faith. It was simply the natural way of relating to their Maker.

Just like a newborn implicitly trusts and has faith in her mother and trusts her mother with her whole life. We were always meant to have faith, even from the beginning when we walked with God.

A reasonable faith. A faith that comports with logic and our sensory experiences and our most basic intuitions about God and ourselves and this world. And not just a faith, but a hope and a love and an affection too.

See, contrary to the theory that modern secular people can just subtract faith and religion and emotion and dogma in order to finally see the world clearly and rationally and truly as it really is, again, Charles Taylor, he's formerly a philosopher at Oxford, now he's at Northwestern.

He points out that secularism is not the absence of belief, but just another set of beliefs with motives of its own. Oftentimes that are unexamined and at the end of the day, just as unprovable as

the beliefs and motives of religious people.

[22 : 24] So you see, a big reason why we are asking, is there a God today, is because we are modern people who've been conditioned to pursue truth through doubt and skepticism.

But if we're honest with ourselves, even when we doubt, it takes faith to do so. We only doubt because of something else that we do believe by faith. So I'm not saying that doubt is necessarily wrong.

Doubt is even warranted by the Christian scriptures. Adam and Eve should have doubted the serpent instead of doubting God in the garden. And as finite and fallible human beings living in a broken world amongst broken people, we have great reason to doubt a whole lot of stuff in this world.

And maybe that's why you doubt God's existence as well. Because you rightfully doubt religious people and religious institutions who have hurt you or others or who've manipulated you or others or who've taken advantage of your trust.

Your doubt, I want you to hear from me, is warranted. But as important as your doubt is, we also need to consider where our faith lies as well.

[23 : 28] Because we were always meant to doubt out of and by faith. Like contrary to Descartes who said, we must doubt in order to know truly, Augustine said, we need to believe in order to know truly.

See, Adam and Eve should have doubted the serpent because of their faith in God's word to them. God's word that spoke creation into being and brought order into chaos and light into darkness. Look at Genesis chapter 1 verse 3. God's word here is constituting reality. And God said, let there be light and there was light. So you see, it was by faith.

It was by faith in that powerful, authoritative word of God speaking into creation that we were always meant to live. It was by that light that God spoke into the world that we were meant to see and behold all of reality as it truly is.

Again, as C.S. Lewis would put it, I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.

[24 : 38] And therefore, the reason we ask questions like, is there a God, is because we stop seeing by God's light. We stop trusting in God's reality constituting word and we've chosen darkness instead.

To use Paul's language here in Romans chapter 1 verse 19, even though God made himself known to us plainly, we wickedly suppress the truth in our unrighteousness. Verse 21, And although we knew God, we refused to give him glory and thanks.

And thus our very thinking and reasoning and understanding of the world became futile. And our hearts were darkened to the point of adoring things other than God, things less than God, less glorious, less wonderful, less good.

Verse 22, Although we claim to be wise, we became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of created things. In verse 25, we exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than through creator.

We totally got it backwards. We totally mixed it up. And you see, this is the Christian account for why we ask the question, is there a God? It's because of this thing called sin.

[25 : 51] It's not just a problem of the head, but of the heart and of the hands as well. And I'm not condemning you as a sinner for being genuinely curious and asking the question, is there a God?

I'm quite glad that people are asking this question, but what I do want to make clear is that sin is the reason why this question has come about as plausible in the first place.

A sinful suppression of the truth and an exchanging of the truth about God for a lie, elevating the creature above the creator. And while it is possible to ask this question with an honest heart, and with a true desire to seek God, it's also possible to ask this question, is there a God with a darkened heart?

A darkened heart that's already determined what it is willing to believe apart from God. A darkened heart that's faithfully committed to a radical skepticism and doubt that excludes and suppresses the truth about God from the very start.

And if that's you this morning, I don't have words of condemnation for you, but I do have words of warning and invitation. Like, might it be that it's not for intellectual and rational reasons that you struggle to believe in God?

[27 : 04] Might it be that you are bound to desires that you already know are not of God? And it's interesting to me how Paul mentions one kind of powerful desire here in verse 24.

Therefore, God gave them up, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. He talks about sex right in the middle of all that.

And you know, the atheist, the famous atheist and author and philosopher Aldous Huxley, he was honest enough to admit that this was the reason why he didn't want to believe in God.

Because it would interfere with his sexual freedom and condemn what he called his erotic revolt.

You have another famous atheist, Thomas Nagel. He's professor of law and philosophy at NYU.

And he too is honest enough to admit that he doesn't just not believe in God, but he doesn't want there to be a God. And he describes himself as having, quote, a cosmic authority problem.

[28 : 10] See, Huxley and Nagel, they recognize and they admit that their hearts and their hands are very much at play along with their heads in their denial of God. And this morning, I just want to ask, might that describe you as well?

And this is not just a question aimed at the atheists and the agnostics in the room, but even those of us who identify as Christians, for all of us who struggle with unbelief and a lack of faith and trust in God and in his words and in his ways, don't we all have a cosmic authority problem that's more than just a matter of our intellect and what's going on in our heads?

Like, I know it's way more comfortable to argue these points and just have it all up here in our minds in some kind of abstract way, like it's just some kind of intellectual exercise.

But God didn't make us as brains on sticks. We are people made in his image meant to engage the world with our head, our hearts, and our hands. And the implications of this, I get, can be terrifying to reckon with, right?

That this, is there a God question is something more than a philosophical debate over what our heads ought to think, but it has major implications for what our hearts are supposed to love, what our hands are supposed to do.

[29 : 28] Like, this could change everything for us, and that's why many of us don't want to be confronted with God's truth. But at the same time, don't we all want the kind of rich and whole and coherent life that we might have if we accept the truth about the world, regardless of what it might cost us.

A head, heart, and hands life aligned, right, with the truest possible story of the world. And not just the truest story of the world, but the most beautiful story of the world about this loving God who came to save the world.

According to our final text that we haven't yet touched today from John's Gospel, the good news of Christianity is that yes, there is a God who made us and who is light. And even when we chose darkness again and again and again throughout our lives and throughout human history, God sent His Word and light back into the world once again, even knowing that His light and His Word would be rejected again.

But He still sent Him with the intention of drawing His wayward children back into His family. And this light, this Word that He sent was none other than His Son, Jesus Christ, the fullest revelation, the fullest proof of God and His glory right here in the flesh, dwelling amongst us, not just full of truth but also full of grace.

For although we had the audacity to exchange the truth about God for a lie and to substitute our creaturely selves as gods into that high and holy place of glory only reserved for God, Jesus, the Son of God, He had the compassion to exchange His blood for our sin and to substitute His creator self as a man on a cursed cross of judgment reserved for sinners like us.

[31 : 16] Now I know that I haven't proved God to you this morning but to summarize what I've tried to present to you more than just reasons and arguments for God's existence is a narrative.

A narrative that assumes that the God revealed to us in Christ is real and that we all implicitly know of this God. And not only that but I've tried to present you with a narrative that accounts for why we find it so hard to believe in God in the first place.

We've wandered as the scriptures say. We've wandered away from His light and we don't see as we ought. Now you may or may not agree with me that this narrative is a plausible explanation of God's existence or of human unbelief but I hope that you could at least take some steps toward agreeing with me that this story of the Son of God pursuing wayward brothers and sisters and

bringing them back home to His Father all at His own costly expense I hope you could agree with me that that is a beautiful story.

A story unlike any other. And don't you want to believe that this is the God who made and sustains the world and who will one day save the world from itself.

Jesus Christ come to dwell with us full of grace and truth. Will you pray with me? God I just pray that you would give us eyes to see what you have made self-evident and that we would not only encounter the truth but the way and the life of Jesus.

[32 : 58] Show us the beauty of the story that you've written and give us a longing to align ourselves with your ways and your story to know you as the God of love who sent your Son to save us even through his death.

God help our unbelief. Help our unbelief I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.