

Why Jesus?

*three questions you need to answer
one experiment you should perform*

by Glen Davis
glenandpaula.com
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The Bible has been translated into English many times. I quote from several translations: the New International Version (abbreviated NIV), the Contemporary English Version (CEV), and the Message (MSG). I follow the standard conventions for referencing the Bible. For example, John 3:16 means the book of John chapter three verse sixteen.

I have a simple goal: I want to show you that faith in Jesus is plausible and then challenge you to discover whether Christianity is true.

But before we get to Jesus, let's start with the existence of God.

From Atheism To Theism

I can't prove to you that God exists, nor can anyone else prove to you that He doesn't. Nobody is still debating whether or not the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides: Pythagoras proved it around 500 B.C. and we've all accepted it since – because he *proved* it. But atheists and theists have been debating since ancient times and neither side has come up with an argument that the other side agrees is compelling.

This should not disturb us, because there are very few things we can prove with rigor. You can cast doubt on almost anything with a little ingenuity. Things we can't prove include:

- That we are not in *The Matrix* (this would explain both déjà vu and the existence of Keanu Reeves)
- That gravity will still work tomorrow (the ground seems stable until an earthquake comes along – what if we're on the verge of some cosmic cataclysm that disables or reverses gravity?)
- That other people exist (what if our senses deceive us and we're really just hallucinating?)
- That other people love us (what if they're really robots designed to seem loving?)
- That Alexander the Great lived (what if the ancient writings about him are the equivalent of *Harry Potter* and we just haven't realized it?)

That's not to say these things are up for grabs; quite the contrary, each of these things ought to be believed. But they should not be believed on the basis of proof, for none of them can be proven. If you think otherwise, then invite a clever friend to play devil's advocate while you try to convince them of any of these propositions. Three responses will get them 90% of the way there: "Why?" "But what if our senses and memories are unreliable?" and "Are those the only possibilities?" You will soon find yourself stumped with no recourse other than to say, "But this is just the way things are. I can't prove it, but we both know I'm right."

And that is the point to bear in mind: we accept lots of things we can't prove. In fact, it turns out that most true statements cannot be proven, and "God exists" is just such a statement.

If proof is impossible, then why should we bother? Shouldn't we all become agnostics and admit that we don't know?

As alluring as that thought is, it's not workable. There are lots of things we can live in ignorance of. You can go your whole life without knowing the exact mass of an electron and trust that reality will sort itself out without your help. But that is only because you don't make choices based upon the mass of an electron.

But saying that we can live as though we don't know whether God exists is like saying that we can live as though we don't know whether we're married. Suppose that you woke up in a hospital with amnesia. Your ignorance of your marital status would not encourage you to think you could live an ambiguously single life; rather, it would compel you to discover the facts of the matter. And your reasoning would be simple: "I can't live as though I am neither single nor married, nor can I live as though I am both single and married. It's either one or the other. I'm either going to start flirting with people or not. I'm either going to use my income to support a family or not. There might be kids at home waiting for me to come home today. Finding out if I'm married is one of the most important questions I must answer!"

In the same way, what we believe about God affects our attitudes and behavior in a wide range of situations. Impartiality is illusory. Every human lives as though some perspective on God was true.

But how can we decide? We have already said that proof is unattainable.

But we have also said that proof is unattainable in most situations, and so we will answer this question the way we answer every other important question in life: we will assess the evidence.

But what evidence for God is there? There are three lines of argument that don't require any special training or expertise to appreciate. They are (1) the fact of existence, (2) the nature of morality, and (3) the widespread nature of religious experience. Each can be introduced by means of a simple question.

Ponder your answer to these questions carefully. Perhaps you will disagree with my answers – but if you do you will need to provide answers of your own.

The First Question: Whence Nature?

There is a very well-known argument for the existence of God that grounds itself in the fact of existence. It is essentially the domino argument: if you see a line of dominos falling then you know that there must have been a first domino. You also know that the first domino was knocked over by something that was not a domino.

Here a slightly more formal version of the argument.

1. The Big Bang happened, which means that universe and everything in it is finitely old. In other words, the universe had a beginning.
2. Everything that begins to exist has a cause for its coming into being. In other words, babies don't come from nowhere and neither do planets or galaxies.
 - a. Therefore, the universe must have been caused to come into existence. That cause was either infinite (uncaused) or finite (caused). If it was finite, then we restart this logical argument at step 1 at a higher level of abstraction, and if we follow the chain of causation far enough we must eventually arrive at an uncaused cause. If, for instance, we discover that the Big Bang was caused by the Big Fuse, we must still account for the existence of the Big Fuse and then for the Big Match that ignited it, and so discovering that we exist in a multiverse would do nothing to derail this argument. Eventually our quest must terminate in a cause that is itself uncaused.
 - b. Pay close attention to the logic here, for this is where many people lose track of what is being argued. This is what mathematicians call a proof by contradiction: if we suppose that all events are caused, we nonetheless see that there must be at least one uncaused event. This event cannot be the universe itself since we know the universe had a beginning and uncaused things, by their very nature, are eternal. They are what philosophers call *necessary* (as opposed to flimsy things like the universe which are called *contingent*).
3. This infinite and uncaused cause must exist independently of the universe. It is therefore supernatural (not natural). It is also staggeringly powerful. At a minimum, it possesses all the power in the universe. And since it is uncaused and yet acts, it must be able to do something that can be fairly described as making choices. To most people, that sounds suspiciously like God.

This is a strong argument that something other than this universe exists. If you reject it, you must account for the existence of the universe. Why is there something rather than nothing? What went “bang” and why?

The Second Question: Whence Morality?

Another well-known argument for God's existence begins by examining the question of morality – God is necessary to explain how morality is possible.

1. Real moral obligation is a fact. We must do good and refrain from evil. For example, we have a real obligation to not rape small children regardless of our culture, beliefs, or personal circumstances.
2. Morality is not an emergent property of matter—it presupposes a nonmaterial reality in which it is embedded.
3. Welcome to a religious worldview.

Here's another way to think about it: suppose that all that exists are particles and the laws that operate upon them. If I stab you, the only thing that this complex arrangement of particles called "me" is doing is moving another complex arrangement of particles labeled "knife" through another complex arrangement of particles called "you". It has no more moral significance than two billiard balls striking one another in a game of pool. In fact, it is merely billions of microscopic billiard balls striking each other. It can be nothing else. To say otherwise is to presuppose that there is something other than the material universe.

I can't emphasize this strongly enough—an atheistic worldview is not logically congruent with a universal moral framework. You can't say that torturing and dismembering a small child is really wrong, because molecules don't produce morality. The most you can say is that such actions are culturally frowned upon or are personally unsettling. But is that what you really believe? Do you believe that in a different culture it would really be okay to torture a kid? Do you actually believe that if you had a different psychological makeup it would be okay to dismember a screaming toddler? I suspect not. At a deep level you know that some things are wrong no matter what anyone says about them – and once you realize that you are well on your way to abandoning atheism.

Please notice that I didn't say atheists can't make moral choices nor did I suggest that atheists torture children. In fact, quite the opposite. I am certain that most atheists take it for granted that they ought not torture kids, and since we stand in agreement on that point I want to follow up by asking if their atheism provides an adequate explanation for these truths that we both hold in common.

This is often considered the strongest evidence for the existence of a nonmaterial realm.

Should you reject it, you must explain the reality of moral obligation. How do you account for it?

The most common dodge to this argument, by the way, is to deny that real moral laws exist. In response, I offer this observation: some thoughts can be thought but not lived. Life is the laboratory of philosophy, and many ideas that thrive in our imaginations can't survive the harsh ecosystem called reality. People who claim that there are no moral laws typically expect others to treat them morally; moreover, they themselves are generally kind and considerate people, even when there is no clear advantage to them for their ethical behavior. If they don't believe their own objection, why should I?

The Third Question: Whence Religion?

1. People from every society claim to have encountered the supernatural. They say that they have had a prayer answered, that they have sensed a presence when no one was around, or that they have seen God intervene in their lives.
2. This is not a handful of individuals here and there—we're talking about multitudes. Perhaps even the majority of people who have ever lived. If you doubt it, ask your friends if they've ever had a profound spiritual or religious experience and then extrapolate from your small sample out to the whole world.
3. They were (and are) either lying, mistaken, or correct.
4. That some have lied seems indisputable. That all or even most were lying seems incongruous with the morality they espouse and embody. Those known as saints, for example, are so designated not just for their impressive mystical experiences but also for their morally praiseworthy lives. More tellingly, you

certainly know people whom you respect and trust who report having had religious experiences. Are they deceiving you?

5. That some have been mistaken also seems indisputable, but this is our plight in every area of life. We have all had hallucinations or particularly lucid dreams, but we do not on that basis assume that our normal experiences are illusory. In the same way, the claim that the majority of humanity has been mistaken about such an important part of their lives – so important that many have been willing to die rather than deny it – boggles the mind and requires far greater proof than the claim that they are honestly reporting real experiences. Again – think of your friends whom you respect and trust who give testimony of profound religious experiences. Are they delusional?
6. It seems that there are religious people because there are experiences which are best explained religiously.

In some ways this is both the weakest and the strongest of the arguments. It is the weakest in that unless you have had a religious experience yourself it is mere anecdotal data. It is the strongest in that if you have had a profound religious experience all the other arguments are merely helpful confirmations.

So Now What?

You have been presented with three lines of evidence for God. I hope they tip you into the camp of people who think that there probably is a God. That would be wonderful, because belief is certainly better than doubt. But mere intellectual assent is not quite what I'm aiming for in this essay.

You see, there is a difference between belief and faith. Faith takes belief and extends it. A famous passage from the Bible puts it this way: “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6, NIV). Whether you believe that the Bible is a special message from God or not, the verse makes a reasonable claim: to connect with God you must not only believe that God exists, you must also believe that He wants to be found – that a relationship with Him is possible.

If God wants to be found, then He must have revealed himself. This implies that one of the major religions is correct. And the first argument (the one about the origin of nature) strongly suggests a monotheistic God who created the universe from nothing. Only the three major monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) describe such a God - other monotheistic faiths (such as Mormonism and certain forms of Hinduism) presuppose a fundamentally different relationship between God and the universe.

That there are so few is important, because some people seem paralyzed at the idea of having to wade through a seemingly limitless number of religions in search of the truth. In fact, it's a pretty short list of religions that merit investigation. You only need to consider a few options and you can stop looking once you find the right one.

The other religions can speak for themselves – I defer to their representatives to make the case for their beliefs. I am a Christian, and so I will begin with Christ's words. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, NIV).

This is an audacious claim. And Jesus also says that this is a testable claim: “If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17, NIV).

In a surprising turn of events, the very question we have admitted cannot be proven by philosophy turns out to be amenable to experimentation. Let us construct an experiment based on the assumption the Jesus hypothesis is true and see whether our experimental results line up with the hypothesis.

Conduct the God Experiment

If I tell you that even a forced, artificial smile can make you feel happy there are two ways you can evaluate that claim: you can research the psychological literature or you can try smiling when you don't feel like it. Both will give you information – but the experimental route will get you the answer quicker and will fill you with more confidence.

In the same way, you can spend years analyzing all the literature that has been produced in the debate about God's existence, or you can just ask God if He's there.

And so the first step for you take if you are seriously interested in the question of God's existence is to pray.

But how should you pray?

You have likely heard of “The Lord's Prayer”. This is the way that Jesus taught his followers to pray. There are several translations into English. This one is from Luke 11:2-4 in the CEV:

Father, help us to honor your name.
Come and set up your kingdom.
Give us each day the food we need.
Forgive our sins, as we forgive everyone who has done wrong to us.
And keep us from being tempted.

Every morning take five minutes to pray using this prayer as an outline to structure your thoughts. That's one minute per line. I usually pray the line close to verbatim (using this or another translation) and then begin to expand on it as my circumstances dictate. For example, what does it mean for me to pray that God would “set up His kingdom”? That's a prayer that the world would become more the way God wants it to be – this is where I insert prayers about genocide and national elections and my local school district and other concerns of a regional or global nature. And I can do the same thing with prayers of a more personal nature: rarely am I in need of food but I am usually in need of something. And so I might pray, “Give me each day the food that I need – and today, Lord, I truly need wisdom to prepare for my meeting with my boss. And I also need healing for my mom.” And in your case, you should add in a segment like this, “Lord, I need You to reveal Yourself to me – I've gone as far as logic can take me and now I need you to pull me the rest of the way in.”

It is important to note that if you do this then the very first request you will make every day is to ask God to help you honor His name. As it turns out, honoring God's name (reputation) by your actions is also one of the most crucial components of this experiment you are conducting. As we saw earlier, you can learn if Jesus is truly a path to God if you actually do what Jesus commanded.

There are four practices which Jesus commanded or modeled again and again: the golden rule, gratitude, generosity, and worship.

So for the next thirty days, I challenge you to live as though God were real by practicing these four Gs:

Golden Rule: treat everyone the way you wish you would be treated in their place. We see Jesus teaching about this in Mark 12:31, Matthew 7:12, and Luke 6:31.

Gratitude: thank God regularly for every good thing you can, ranging from life and laughter all the way down to food and rest. For most people, this leads to the practice of pausing and thanking God before every meal. We see Jesus modeling gratitude in Matthew 14:19, Matthew 15:36, Matthew 26:26-27, and John 11:41.

Generosity: give to others (time, hospitality, respect, money) liberally. Jesus commands generosity in Matthew 6:2-4, Luke 6:30, Luke 6:38, Luke 11:41, and Luke 12:33.

Going: commit to attending worship services faithfully. Jesus models this practice in Luke 4:15-16 and John 18:20. Obviously, Jesus didn't attend Christian worship services in these passages because they didn't exist yet. But after his resurrection he commissioned his followers to begin preaching in his name, and so if we desire to honor him then we will do so by attending Christian services.

This is merely the surface, of course. As you begin to experience God's grace in your life you should read the gospels and do whatever you see Jesus commanding or modeling there. But these four practices are a good place to start.

After a month evaluate the hypothesis: does life make more sense lived this way or the way you were living previously?

I want to make one thing crystal-clear: deciding that life makes more sense when viewed theistically doesn't make you a Christian. Only faith in Jesus does that. I merely hope this experiment will open you up to the idea that the carpenter from Nazareth knew what he was talking about.

And if you decide that Jesus was sent from God and spoke the truth, then listen to these words and trust in him. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26, NIV).

So That's It

So that's it. Three questions and an experiment. Volumes have been written on this subject, and if you want to learn more I commend two books to you: *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller and *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. You may find reading them helpful.

But whether you read them or not, answer the three questions I posed and then put the Jesus hypothesis to the test.

I'll close with this promise from Jesus: "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." Luke 11:9-10 (NIV)

Ask, seek, and knock, for God exists and He rewards those who diligently seek Him.

If you enjoyed this essay, there is a companion piece called [The Jesus FAQ](#). This is one is meant to invite you to follow Jesus, the other is meant to inform you about what he taught. It does not presuppose that you believe the Bible is the word of God, although it does assume you're willing to at least treat it like any other ancient document. You can find it at [glenandpaula.com](#)