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Perspective

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Perspective is a monthly journal with articles and book reviews. It is part of the “equipping” ministry of Mount Vernon Baptist Church, where we exist to KNOW, EQUIP, and SEND one another for the worship and glory of God.

SERMON SCHEDULE

May 4

A Church Is Born

Colossians 1:1–2

May 11

A Thankful Heart

Colossians 1:3–8

May 18

An Unceasing Prayer

Colossians 1:9–14

May 25

Does Holiness Mean Much to You?

Psalm 5

Pastoral Assistant: Dustin Butts

For a full list of past sermons,
visit www.mvbchurch.org.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTICLE

Is God Really There?

1

An article on the evidence of the reality of God.

by Aaron Menikoff

BOOK REVIEW

***Prayer and the Knowledge of God* by Graeme Goldsworthy**

5

A book review on gospel-centered prayer.

reviewed by Jim Heiskell

FIGHTER VERSE

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:8 (ESV)

Is God Really There?

Aaron Menikoff

I REMEMBER LYING AWAKE in bed as a child, eyes wide open, while the darkness seeped into my room. From my window I saw stars dancing, and I wondered, “Is there a God?” That thought opened the door to a number of other questions. If he is there, how long has he been there? Who made him? And what is he thinking? If he existed forever, does this mean I will exist forever? Now *that* was a very uncomfortable idea for my young mind to ponder. Life without end was too big a thought for me to handle. So I turned my attention to less stressful matters. Would Luke Skywalker marry Princess Leia?

My parents were open but cautious about God’s existence. They certainly weren’t atheists, but neither did they accept the notion of a personal God. Mine was a home that embraced the supernatural in general, but had no patience for a God who meddled in the morality of mere men. We were more likely to have a Ouija board on our coffee table than a Bible on our bedside. And though I remember my grandmother and me trying to see if we could bend spoons with our minds (seriously), we never gave any thought to praying to a God who cares. Such was life as a child of the Pacific Northwest.

Is there a God? I wonder how you would answer the question. Chances are you picked up this article because you *are* a Christian and you believe in the Triune God of the Bible—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But how would you answer a friend who asked you the simple question, “If you can’t see God, why do you believe he exists?” Perhaps you are a skeptic, reading this article as a favor to a friend or family member. Maybe you are like I was—you grew up in a home that didn’t make much of God at all, and you just aren’t sure what to think. I want you to know that there are some good reasons to believe in God. Here are a few that have helped me.

First, nature is evidence of the existence of God.

We all know that words can’t do justice to the beauty and grandeur of the natural world. Whether it’s the depth of the blue sea, the power packed into a hurricane, or the colorful hues of the simplest sunset, there is something jaw dropping about the world in which we live. There’s nothing like driving outside the city to look up at the stars without a gazillion headlights dimming your view.

Hiding behind all this raw beauty is an even more impressive truth: the universe in which we live is finely-tuned, perfectly balanced to be a hospitable environment for mankind—and this can hardly be an accident. Scientists have discovered that if the force of gravity were even slightly different in one direction, the sun would burn too hot for the earth to survive as a life-sustaining planet. Just how precise does the force of gravity need to be in order to make it possible for there to be life on earth? If it were off by just one part in 10^{40} (a 10 with 40 zeros after it), that would mean no sun and, therefore, no earth.

But that’s not all. Scientists agree that the universe is in a constant state of expansion—and it has been expanding since it’s beginning. Scientists may not know how the universe began, but since Einstein they have argued for a Big Bang—a moment of tremendous force that started everything. The rate at which the universe started expanding is no small matter (no pun intended!). The universe had to expand with just enough force to keep it from reversing course and collapsing in on itself, but not so much force that stars and planets would fail to form. Just how precise did this expansion have to be? Try exactly one part in 10^{55} .

I could go on, but you get the point. It is highly unlikely that a universe arrived “naturally”—without the intervention of God. Philosophers J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, offer this reflection on the fact that our universe is so finely-tuned:

Can the cosmic fine-tuning be plausibly attributed to physical necessity? According to this alternative, the constants and quantities must have the values they do, and there was really no chance or little chance of the universe’s not being life-permitting. Now on the face of it this alternative [one that denies the existence of divine intervention] seems extraordinarily implausible. It requires us to believe that a life-prohibiting universe is virtually physically impossible. But surely it does seem possible. If the primordial matter and antimatter had been differently proportioned, if the universe had expanded just a little more slowly, if the entropy of the universe were marginally greater, any of these

adjustments and more would have prevented a life-permitting universe, yet all seem perfectly possible physically. The person who maintains that the universe must be life-permitting [without admitting the existence of an intelligent designer] is taking a radical line that requires strong proof. But as yet there is none; this alternative is simply put forward as a bare possibility.¹

What do scientists do when they know that the existence of life is highly, highly, highly, highly (you get the point) improbable, and don't want to accept the possibility that God had something to do with it? They have come up with proposals like the multiverse theory. According to this theory, the earth is a single planet in one of billions, if not trillions of universes. With that many universes to choose from, the possibility increases for there being at least one universe with conditions hospitable for life.

But the multiverse theory is just that: a theory. It's what Brian Greene once called, "high-risk science," because it isn't based on any hard evidence.² To assert the existence of a multiverse we can't prove takes at least as much faith as it does to accept the existence of a God we can't see.

The fact that the earth is so amazingly conditioned to provide humans and animals a hospitable home helps me to read Psalm 19:1 in a whole new light, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."

Second, people, however imperfectly, accept a universal standard of right and wrong.

For centuries philosophers have struggled with the question, "Why is there so much good in the world?" Maybe that surprises you. You are probably accustomed to hearing about the problem of evil. It's a question often posed to those with the firm conviction that there is a God, and not just any God, a God who is all-good and all-powerful. If that's true, these skeptics ask, then why is there any suffering in the world? Why would God allow that? Admittedly, that is a great question, and one the Bible is not silent about.

However, there is another question, just as important, that every skeptic needs to answer. I'll put it another way, "If there is no God in the world, if there is no Being who as the Author of life can distinguish right from wrong,

why is it universally accepted that there is such a thing as right and wrong?"

The fact that we are moral beings, that humans don't spend all their days conspiring how to steal from the weak to feather their own nests (at least most of us), is good evidence that there is a God, and that God is good.

C. S. Lewis began his famous work, *Mere Christianity*, with this line of reasoning. The Oxford English professor who came to a personal crisis of faith after dealing with the death of his mother and the horrors of World War I, delivered a series of radio addresses while Great Britain was rocked by World War II. People were struggling to make sense of life, and Lewis believed the place to begin was with the existence of a God. He was struck (and these are my words, not his) that God took sides. Lewis's radio messages turned into a book in defense of the Christian faith.

Lewis argued that everyone has to decide between two very different worldviews. The first, the materialist worldview, argues that stuff just happens. The world just is. There is no supernatural, divine explanation for anything. In a marvelous confluence of random events, life came into being and everything that has happened since—from the existence of humans to the painting of the Mona Lisa to the building of the Burj Khalifa is nothing more than a serendipitous roll of the dice.

The other view, what Lewis called the religious view, is much more reasonable. In fact, it's the only view that makes sense of the human mind, a mind that can not only think, but think morally. It is a mind that doesn't just make plans in order to stock up enough food to get through the winter, but a mind that actually cares about people who don't have food. It's a mind governed by what Lewis referred to as The Moral Law. This Law, he wrote,

is not simply a fact about human behaviour in the same way as the Law of Gravitation is, or may be, simply a fact about how heavy objects behave. On the other hand, it is not a mere fancy, for we cannot get rid of the idea, and most of the things we say and think about men would be reduced to nonsense if we did. And it is not simply a statement about how we should like men to behave for our own convenience; for the behaviour we find inconvenient; and may even be the opposite. Consequently, this Rule of Right and

¹ J. P. Moreland & William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (IVP, 2003), 484.

² Brian Greene, "Welcome to the Multiverse," May 21, 2012. Found at <http://www.newsweek.com/brian-greene-welcome-multiverse-64887>. Accessed April 28, 2014.

Wrong, or Law of Human Nature, or whatever you call it, must somehow or other be a real thing—a thing that is really there, not made up by ourselves. And yet it is not a fact in the ordinary sense, in the same way as our actual behaviour is a fact. It begins to look as if we shall have to admit that there is more than one kind of reality; that, in this particular case, there is something above and beyond the ordinary facts of men's behaviour, and yet quite definitely real—a real law, which none of us made, but which we find pressing on us.³

We live in a world where right and wrong mean something. And even if we disagree (as we often do) as to what right or wrong is, that doesn't eliminate the category. Humans may disagree with whether it is right to permit same-sex marriage, subsidize health care, or engage in bilateral talks with tyrants. On these and a thousand other particulars there is, admittedly, no consensus. But when it comes to basic human rights, generations and generations are in lock-step agreement that some moral standards are absolute.

Tim Keller, the pastor of New York City's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, wrote *The Reason for God: Belief in the Age of Skepticism*. In it, he offers several clues for God. These clues include the reality that the world began. What caused it? The fact that the world is hospitable to life. How did that happen? The fact that the laws of nature are so reliable. Why is that? And even the fact that we care about beauty. How does that make sense without God? But the reason that Keller really hangs his hat on to explain why belief in God is so necessary harkens back to Lewis. Keller calls it the The Concept of Moral Obligation:

Though we have been taught that all moral values are relative to individuals and cultures, we can't live like that. In actual practice we inevitably treat *some* principles as absolute standards by which we judge the behavior of those who don't share our values. What gives us the right to do that, if all moral beliefs are relative? Nothing gives us the right. Yet we can't stop it. People who laugh at the claim that there is a transcendent moral order do not think that racial genocide is just impractical or self-defeating, but that it is *wrong*. The Nazis who exterminated Jews may have claimed that they didn't feel it was immoral at

all. We don't care. We don't care if they sincerely felt they were doing a service to humanity. They ought not to have done it.⁴

It's that last sentence that really packs a punch: "They ought not to have done it." How can we say this with such certainty? On what grounds can we make such a universal claim? Where does the very idea of "ought" come from? I think the question is hugely important, and it points us right in the direction of God. "Ought" exists because God exists. Get rid of God, and you might as well get rid of good, too.

The fact that God is good rings throughout the Bible. "Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad; you restored your inheritance as it languished; your flock found a dwelling in it; in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy" (Psalm 68:10). The theist (one who believes in God) has no problem explaining the fact that there is an "oughtness" to reality. Nazis should be punished and heroes should be praised because we are all made in the image of God, and God is good.

Third, the Bible testifies to the existence and character God.

Skeptics will not like my third reason for believing in a God whom I cannot see. I should note that it does not stand alone. It is preceded by two arguments that are in no way dependent on the third. Whatever you think about the Bible, the fact remains that there is no natural explanation for the existence of life on earth and there is no merely human explanation for the problem of good. The existence of God is the best and most satisfying answer to the both issues.

Mortimer Adler, the philosopher and author of the popular *How to Read a Book*, wrote a less-well known volume, *How to Think About God*. In it he argues that it's quite reasonable to believe that God exists. However, there is no evidence, according to Adler, that God cares. To affirm the existence of God, writes Adler, "is not to be assured that God is concerned with our conduct or cares what happens to us."⁵

Perhaps Adler would be right, unless we had reason to believe that God not only exists, but that God has spoken. Anyone who wants to think seriously about God should take seriously the fact that, for centuries, faithful

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper, 1952), 20.

⁴ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 147.

⁵ Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Think About God* (Collier, 1980), 167.

Jews and Christians alike have begun their quest to know God with the basic assumption that he has made himself known, and not only in nature but in words. Whatever one says about the Bible, there can be no denying that it claims to be the words of a God who has spoken. Put another way, God has revealed himself in the words of the Bible.

The prophets of the Old Testament identified themselves as men sent by God to speak his words. Jeremiah, writing around 550 BC, penned the following words to explain his ministry: "Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth'" (Jer 1:9). Jeremiah can, of course, be dismissed as a lunatic. But what cannot be denied is that he presented himself as someone whose words—spoken and written—were the very words of God. And the much older prophet Amos described God's revelation this way: "For the LORD God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Amo 3:7).

The writers of the New Testament certainly affirmed the divine authority of the Old Testament prophets (2 Tim 3:16), but they also believed that God continued to speak through them. The author of the Book of Hebrews, while penning his words, understood himself to be delivering the very words of God as he urged his readers to heed them. "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking" (Heb 12:25). But who is speaking? God is, to his people, through the words of the author to the Hebrews. Peter, the famous follower of Christ and witness of his resurrection believed that God was at work in the early days of the church providing a divine, written work for his people. Peter put the many writings of Paul on par with the writings of the Old Testament (2 Pet 3:16).

When I go to the Bible I find words that describe the unfolding plan of God, a plan artfully summarized by J. I. Packer who asked the question, "What is the content of God's revelation?":

This is determined by our present plight as sinners. Though we have lapsed into ignorance of God and a godless way of life, God has not abandoned His purpose to us as His friends; instead, He has resolved in His love to rescue us from sin and restore us to Himself. His plan for doing this was to make Himself known to us as our Redeemer and Re-creator, through the incarnation, death, resurrection,

and reign of His Son... Thus the history of salvation (the acts of God) took place in the context of the history of revelation (the oracles of God).⁶

In short, Packer is saying that the Bible presents itself as a game plan for God. The Bible is a summary and explanation of how God has acted in history to save a people for himself. I believe my first two explanations for the existence of God (certainly not new to me) are compelling. But if you want to know this God, if you want to know how he acts and thinks, if you want insight into his character, then you have no other choice but to seek out his words. There you'll find what Adler missed: not only does God exist, but God cares for the people he has created.

The fact that the Bible testifies to the existence of God is not the only proof that God exists, but it is a real proof nonetheless. God has spoken, and that changes everything.

Conclusion

My path to faith did not come by reading an essay presenting rational arguments for God's existence and love. My faith in God came after I knew with my mind and felt in my heart that something was not right with the world and something was not right with me. As a tiny creature in a vast universe I was calling out for answers, answers that mattered more than the next paycheck or ballgame. To my surprise, God came to me through his Word. The message of the prophet Isaiah describes God's action in my life:

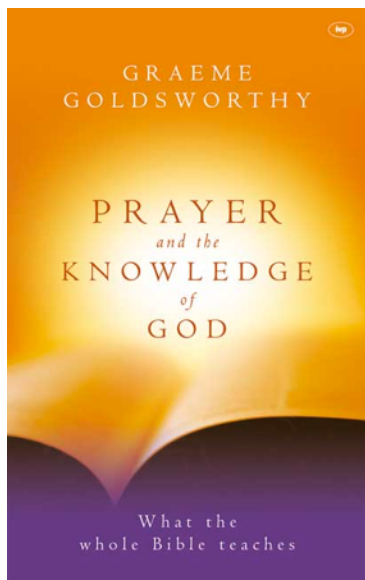
In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 29:18-19).

All the arguments of the finest philosophers will never lead the skeptic to know God until he realizes he's deaf, blind, meek, and poor. I was once was deaf but now I hear the words of a book, I once was blind but now I see. By God's grace, I believe in a God whom I cannot see, at least not yet.

~Aaron Menikoff

This article also appears on www.christianity.com.

⁶ J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Hodder, 1965), 56. I appreciate Packer for pointing me to many of the Scripture passages cited in this article.



Book Review

Prayer and the Knowledge of God: What the Whole Bible Teaches

by Graeme Goldsworthy

Reviewed by Jim Heiskell

disease polio. On the day he was diagnosed the doctors told my parents that he would not live through the night. My grandparents came immediately from Knoxville, Tennessee to Atlanta and when they arrived at the hospital my grandfather knelt and prayed,

*Lord, we pray not our will, but that Your will be done.
Lord, somehow use this terrible experience in Andy's life
to Your glory.*

Miraculously Andy did live and after months of intensive physical therapy his recovery was so complete that my parents were told that he would be able to start first grade as a normal six year-old. To help him learn how to adapt to a normal school environment my mother started a small preschool in our home in the summer of 1949, which ultimately came to be known as The Heiskell School.

Throughout its history, my mother stated that the purpose of The Heiskell School was to glorify God and for each child to come to know Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior. The hundreds of children and parents who have come to faith in Jesus Christ over the last 65 years through the ministry of the school testify to the fact that my grandfather's gospel-centered prayer in the hospital was answered.

This personal story wonderfully illustrates the overriding theme of Graeme Goldsworthy's book *Prayer and the Knowledge of God*. He states that "all prayer that is uttered in the light of the gospel, and by which we identify with God's revealed will and purpose in the gospel, will be infallibly answered. The answer might not be exactly as

we conceive it should be, but the prayer will be answered" (75).

This same focus on *gospel-centered praying* can be seen throughout the book:

- "The relationship of prayer to the gospel cannot be stressed too much, for it provides the basis for any answer we give to the question of what can we legitimately pray for" (29–31).
- "All Christian prayer is to be oriented towards the Gospel and its God-ordained outcome"(60).
- "All prayer is intended by God to be a way of sharing in the revealed purpose of God for the salvation of the world" (79).

This theme is stated and constantly reinforced in the first half of the book as Goldsworthy focuses on four principles of Gospel-centered prayer. Then in the second half of the book, he traces the progress of gospel-centered prayer in scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

Principles of Gospel-Centered Prayer

To begin with Goldsworthy challenges the reader with the thought that a Biblical understanding of prayer is directly related to our knowledge of God and of his grace in the gospel. He moves us from the definition of prayer most of us have as simply "talking to God" to a more biblical definition of "prayer is our response to God as He speaks to us."

Then he focuses on the basis, the source, the enabling and the pattern of all prayer by asking and answering four fundamental questions about gospel-centered prayer:

The basis of all prayer—who can pray?

The author clearly makes the case that prayer belongs only to the children of the Father. Those of us who have placed our faith in Christ and have been adopted into the family of God can pray with confidence in the knowledge

that our prayers will be heard. Our confidence comes not from who we are, but who Christ is and what he has done for us through the gospel.

The source of all prayer—who initiates prayer?

There is a common notion among Christians that “prayer starts with us, somehow influences God, and then produces some outcome” (55). In this chapter, the author dispels this notion by stating that “in prayer God allows us to be identified with the outworking of his will and his purposes for all creation” (66). In other words, prayer is initiated by God and is the means by which God achieves his revealed purpose of redeeming mankind through the gospel.

The enabling of all prayer—who empowers prayer?

The author states that “Biblical prayer is prayer to the Father, through the mediation of the Son, in the enabling power of the Holy Spirit” (82). The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to pray gospel-centered prayers. We should not reflect on the weakness of our faith and our inability to believe that God will answer our prayers. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the one who empowers us to have a strong faith, not in ourselves, but in the saving work of Jesus and his power to accomplish his plan and purpose as revealed in the gospel.

The pattern of prayer—how should we pray?

The author describes the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4 as a pattern for how we should pray, but he also emphasizes how Jesus’ prayer should not be viewed as an all-purpose prayer for both Christians and non-Christians alike. Rather, it should be seen “as an integral part of the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of the world” (105). The Lord’s Prayer is a gospel-centered prayer and must be understood and prayed in the context of Jesus’ redemptive ministry and the coming of the kingdom of God.

The Progress of Gospel-Centered Prayer

Goldsworthy then takes the principles he emphasizes in the first half of the book and traces how they are woven throughout scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

Progress of Prayer—The History of Israel

The author emphasizes how prayer is tied to the covenant relationship of the people of Israel to God and how prayers in the Old Testament look forward to and are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. They are centered in the gospel.

Progress of Prayer—The Psalms

The Psalms provide the most extensive example of prayer and praise as it came to be used by the people of God in

the Old Testament. The book of Psalms also emphasizes “the covenant framework for all prayer, and thus foreshadows the person and work of Christ” (142). We are to pray the prayers in Psalms as gospel-centered prayers.

Progress of Prayer—Prophetic Eschatology

The author writes that “prophetic eschatology presents a view of a future glorious restoration of the nation and institutions of Israel...and the fulfillment of this restoration in Christ” (156). Our gospel-centered prayers need to be “in praise and thanksgiving for the saving work of Christ, for missions, and for perseverance in our faith until Christ comes again” (157).

Progress of Prayer—The New Testament

The author reflects on the various aspects of prayer in the New Testament and observes that they are directed toward the fulfillment of the gospel. Therefore, in the epistles, Paul prays that believers will grow in their knowledge of God so that “the gospel will have its full out-working in their lives and in their fellowship with him in the ministry of the gospel” (180).

What Do You Think About Christ?

In the concluding chapter, Goldsworthy summarizes the major principles of Gospel-centered prayer by stating that “all authentic prayer is prayer towards the fulfilling of God’s purposes in the Gospel” (186).

I am challenged, as I hope you are, to make my prayers in the future to be more gospel-centered. If you want to do the same and have your perspective on prayer dramatically transformed as a result, I strongly encourage you to read *Prayer and the Knowledge of God*.

