

**FOR  
GOOD  
REASON**

*Answering Questions of Faith and  
Purpose in Today's World*

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# INTRODUCTION

We were at the dinner table—my parents, three sisters, and me—when the conversation turned to my dad’s job. He was a pilot and there were rumors of a contract dispute between the Air Line Pilots Association and the management of his airline. As is often the case in labor disputes, the question of a work stoppage arose. I was in sixth grade and did not know a whole lot about such matters, but I was curious. It seemed like going on strike might be a hard thing for someone to do, because it would mean no paycheck for however long the strike lasted. Thinking for a moment, I then brought the entire conversation to a halt with this simple question that I posed to my father:

*Dad, would you rather go on strike or eat a golf ball?*

The room fell silent for a few seconds as we all felt the gravity of my question. Then, of course, my dad just burst out laughing in his best, “What kind of question is that?” expression. You know the saying, there’s no such thing as a stupid question? Well, obviously whoever thought that up wasn’t sitting at our dinner table that night. In retrospect, I’m not sure why I asked this specific question; I just knew that my father was facing a difficult situation and I wondered just how hard this decision was for him and his fellow pilots. Eating a golf ball seemed like a reasonable comparison to my eleven-year old mind.

I tell this story to give you a little insight into why I would write this book. I have always been—and still very much am—an incessant question-asker. Not every one of my questions is as nonsensical as the one about the horrible strike/

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golf ball dilemma. But I have always found the world to be a fascinating place, and so I have always asked a lot of questions, about pretty much everything.

I am willing to bet that you have a lot of questions too, about a lot of different things. We've all stared up at the sky and asked, *How big is the universe?* We've all had food and wondered, *Why do I like certain tastes but not others?* We've all had difficult days and asked, perhaps to nobody in particular, *Is there any purpose to my life?* We are inquisitive creatures, and our lives are full of asking questions.

When I graduated from college in 1991, I began working in college ministry, and have served students at two major universities in the northeast US. During these many years of working with college students and faculty, I have been asked thousands of questions about thousands of subjects. What I've discovered is that there are a handful of questions that come up more often than others. For example, students routinely ask me how they can know that God exists, and whether absolute morality exists. I have spent all of my adult vocational life talking with the most inquisitive demographic in society—college students—and have been forced to wrestle with many of these profound and important questions.

After nearly thirty years of late-night conversations, I thought it might be worthwhile to put to print what I have discovered to be answers to these questions. These are not necessarily *the* answers to the questions—definitive proof—but rather answers that I believe give us good reason to believe. Nevertheless, I do try to think clearly about these questions, and let's face it—the reality is that the odds are good that most of us out there are not experts in these fields. And if you *are* an expert in one of them, you are probably an expert in only *one* of them. In other words, most of us are just regular people with lots of questions, and I offer this book as one regular guy's attempt to answer them after twenty years of research, wrestling with, and debating them with some of America's next generation of leaders.

That said, it would be fruitful for me to share my bias. I have always had the same kinds of questions that you will see in this book, but as you will

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discover later, I didn't always approach these questions the same way I do now. A moment ago I mentioned that I have worked in college student ministry my whole professional life. And I see the world through the lens of not just theism, but specifically Christian theism. This doesn't mean that other worldviews don't offer some great answers to many of life's questions. But what I can offer you is my best attempt at answering them.

So, if you find this helpful as you seek answers to these questions yourself, terrific. If you don't, I'm sure this book will make a nice re-gift at a potluck holiday party in your neighborhood. Either way, I hope you enjoy this read!

# CHAPTER ONE

## Do I Need Proof to Believe?

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*“It is said that an argument is what convinces reasonable men and a proof is what it takes to convince even an unreasonable man.”*

Alexander Vilenkin

While I sat in the airport and waited for the announcement that we could begin boarding, I noticed something unusual. A plane had landed, and there was all kinds of activity around it. Its left engine was on fire, and smoke was billowing out of it. Fire engines came and put the flames out, and mechanics came and began working on the engine.

As I stood there and watched this amazing scene unfold, I thought to myself, wow, I’m sure glad I’m not on *that* plane! No sooner did that thought enter my mind than an announcement came over the loudspeakers: “Ladies and gentlemen, flight 5249 from Myrtle Beach to Philadelphia will be delayed due to some mechanical issues. We are working on it and will be with you as soon as possible.”

What? That plane that was on *fire* was *my* plane? Needless to say, I was uncomfortable. Surely there was a mistake, right? They wouldn’t use that same plane for my flight, would they?

Well, a couple of hours went by, and I watched the mechanics work on the engine. Then they pushed the plane forward into position next to the jetway. And then came another announcement: “Ladies and gentlemen, we are now ready to begin boarding flight 5249 from Myrtle Beach to Philadelphia...”

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It *was* my plane! I was supposed to board the very one that was on fire a couple of hours earlier. Never before in my life did I pray so hard as when I grudgingly set foot on that aircraft.

This story crystallizes for me the situation that we are all in with respect to our beliefs. I cannot tell you the number of times I've heard someone say, "I will not believe in God unless I have proof." Or, "I follow the evidence; I don't take things on faith." And yet it is important to realize that we all live by faith every day.

When you board an airplane, do you know the pilot personally? Do you know the people who built or maintained the plane? Did you observe the plane being loaded with fuel? Did you actually witness the tests that were done on the aircraft to ensure that the systems were functioning properly? Would you even know what to look for in any case? Probably not. We board airplanes and entrust our lives to people we do not know. We trust that they will get us to our intended destination. We very much place our lives in the hands of strangers.

Why do we do this? On one level, it's simply the easiest way to get from point A to point B, and so practicality demands it. But on a larger scale, we feel safe on airplanes, as well we should. Airplanes seldom crash, and even when they do, most people survive. The National Transportation and Safety Board found that the odds of being in a plane crash are 1 in 11 million, and the odds of dying in a plane crash are 1 in 29.4 million. In 2014, there was one airplane accident for every 4.4 million flights. The data tells us that flying is a very safe way to travel, much safer than traveling by automobile. In fact, the odds of dying in a car crash are approximately 1 in 7,700. Flying is orders of magnitude safer than driving.

But it's not just about our personal safety—it's also about getting where we want to go. We board commercial jets because we have confidence that we will get where we want to go, safely—even if we arrive late a sizable percentage of the time. Nonetheless, we have reasons for having confidence in air travel: good airline safety records, government regulations, and our past experience flying all provide us with a reasonable record of past performance that informs our

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future travel plans. That is to say, we fly on planes because we have good reason to believe it's a safe and sensible way to travel.

This is a good place to pause and reflect for a moment. We have confidence (faith) in flying because we have good reason to. We do not have any proof that the plane we are about to board will get us to our destination safely. We just have good reason to believe that it will—or, I should say, several good reasons. But, of course, what is good reason for one person may not be for another. There are plenty of people who choose not to fly, perhaps out of fear of crashing, or lack of confidence that the airline will get them where they need to go in a timely manner, or an uncertainty over whether their luggage will arrive in the same city as they themselves do.

So, what *is* faith? For many, faith is belief without evidence, and I can understand why they might think that. Some people think that faith is necessarily blind. While it's true that faith is about believing something you cannot necessarily see, that doesn't automatically mean that faith is blind. Faith consists of believing *in* and believing *that*. Here's what I mean: if I say, "I believe *that* the Yankees are the greatest baseball franchise of all time," I'm expressing confidence in the truthfulness of a proposition; if I say, "I believe *in* the Yankees," I'm expressing something different—namely, that I believe *so much* that the Yankees are special that I'm investing some portion of my life into them.

In the first case ("I believe *that*..."), we are looking for evidence to support our belief. In the second case ("I believe *in*..."), we not only are looking for mere evidence to support our belief, but rather evidence of such a convincing nature that we are motivated to make a commitment of some kind. Believing *that* the Yankees are the greatest baseball franchise of all time could be backed up with statistics and data. Believing *in* the Yankees is a personal investment, a personal commitment to cheer for them, watch them play, follow their season, buy their merchandise, etc. It is about evidence, yes, but it involves more than that. It involves action of some sort on behalf of the belief. Faith, then, can be seen both as belief, but also as *trust*.

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We can have trust in objects (like airplanes) or people (like airline pilots), or claims (Jim Smith is an airline pilot). Trust transcends mere belief. Belief is intellectual assent. Trust is much more than that. Trust is, as we saw in the case of boarding a plane, an active belief. It really is an action. Before we sit, we believe a chair can hold us up; we trust when we sit down in it. We believe intellectually *that* a particular flight will get us safely where we want to go, but we have faith (trust) *in* that flight when we board the plane and allow it to take off with us buckled in the seat. In both cases, we believe *that* and believe *in* for good reason.

It is this “good reason” idea that I want to emphasize. Just as there are varying degrees of faith, there are varying degrees of “good reason” anchoring that faith. And what one person considers to be “good reason” might not be enough to convince another person. There are many people who know the safety and security of airline travel but still will not set foot on a plane.

It is clear to me that everyone exercises faith every day. We all have trust in things for which we do not have proof, or even abundant evidence, but for which we do have, in our own view, good reason to believe. When understood this way, the notion of “I will only believe that which has been proved” rings hollow. Who among us does not, every day, trust in objects, people, or propositions, without having proof of their trustworthiness?

It is impossible to live without faith—whether we are talking about the low bar of belief (intellectual assent) or the faith-in-action of trust. But when it comes to God, many people retreat back to the “proof” defense. They say they will not believe without proof. But why? Why isn’t “good reason” good enough? Apparently what people consider to be “good reason” to believe is a bar set so high that, for all intents and purposes, it cannot be reached.

Some people respond, correctly, with the idea that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Miracles (or supernatural claims) are the most extraordinary claims of all because they fall outside the laws of nature. If someone claims to have experienced a miracle, it is far more likely that even the

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most unlikely natural explanation is better than a miraculous one. For example, consider two claims:

1. This American Airlines flight will take you safely to Chicago.
2. This American Airlines flight will take you around the sun and break the time-space continuum and allow you to go back in time.

The first claim is not extraordinary. After all, American Airlines routinely flies passengers safely to Chicago from all over the world. It does not take much faith to believe that and put your trust in them. The second claim, however, is quite extraordinary. We have never seen a commercial airliner go around the sun, and as far as we know, it's not technologically capable of such a feat. Moreover, we do not even have theoretical grounds for believing that traveling around the sun could transport someone back in time. It would be miraculous for an American Airlines flight to leave Earth's atmosphere, fly millions of miles through space, travel around the sun, and take people back in time. Boarding a plane with that hope in mind would take an incredible amount of faith—no reasonable, sane person would ever do it.

Eighteenth century British philosopher David Hume addressed this topic in his work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Here is how Hume defined a miracle:

A Miracle is a Violation of the Laws of Nature; and as a firm and unalterable Experience has established these Laws, the Proof against a Miracle, from the very Nature of the Fact, is as entire as any Argument from Experience can possibly be imagined. Why is it more than probable, that all Men must die; that Lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the Air; that Fire consumes Wood, and is extinguished by Water; unless it be, that these Events are found agreeable to the Laws of Nature, and there is required a Violation of these Laws, or in other Words, a Miracle to prevent them? Nothing is esteem'd [sic] a Miracle, if it ever happen in the common Course of Nature... There

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must, therefore, be a uniform Experience against every miraculous Event, otherwise the Event would not merit that Appellation. And as a uniform Experience amounts to a Proof, there is here a direct and full Proof, from the Nature of the Fact, against the Existence of any Miracle; nor can such a Proof be destroy'd, or the Miracle render'd credible, but by an opposite Proof, which is superior.

In other words, a miracle is something contrary to the laws of nature. Our experience of the world has made it strongly reasonable to think things work according to regularities. We therefore have good reason to think this won't admit exceptions. Any claim of a miracle, then, goes against all human experience. The problem with this, of course, is that Hume argues himself in a circle. He says that we can only conclude something is a miracle if we know humans have experienced one. But Hume then declares that we can never know that a human has experienced one, even if someone has made such a claim, because universal human experience is of natural phenomena.

But millions of people throughout history have claimed miraculous experiences. Are we to just throw these out? According to Hume, yes. Hume argues, "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish." In other words, Hume is saying that we should believe in miraculous claims if and only if all alternative explanations are even *more* miraculous.

Faith in extraordinary claims—miracles being the most extraordinary of them all—requires extraordinary evidence, or, to put it in terminology we've used here, we need to have *really* good reason to believe extraordinary claims, especially those claims that are supernatural or miraculous in nature.

Consider the claim of Jesus's resurrection. Hume wrote of this specific example:

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When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should have really happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of the testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

No matter how improbable, how fantastic, how absurd alternative theories explaining the facts surrounding the resurrection of Jesus may be, they are automatically less fantastic, less absurd than a miraculous claim. And so the greater miracle is rejected.

Many people are that way when it comes to God. No matter how absurd, how crazy, how ludicrous an alternative idea or explanation for some phenomenon is, it is automatically less absurd, less crazy, and less ludicrous than God's existence and actions in this world.

In this book, we will challenge Hume's argument. I agree with him that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Of course, this calls into question what constitutes "extraordinary" evidence, and we are back to the idea that something may be evidence of an extraordinary kind to one person, but not to another. Regardless, while the claim of God's existence may *seem* extraordinary—even miraculous, by Hume's understanding—I don't think it is. I will argue that the existence of God is the most reasonable, rational, and straightforward understanding of the world in which we live, and that far from being an extraordinary claim, it is more extraordinary for this world to be the way it is if God does *not* exist. That is, the extraordinary claim is that God does not exist.

This book isn't *just* about questions that people ask—it's about a way of thinking. It's about asking ourselves the hard questions and challenging our

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own worldview. It's about considering what constitutes "good reason" to believe, and it's about evaluating evidence to see if it meets our standard.

Princeton scholar David Berlinski said, "The concept of sufficient evidence is infinitely elastic. It depends on context. Taste plays a role, and so does intuition, intellectual sensibility, a kind of feel for the shape of the subject, a desire to be provocative, a sense of responsibility, caution, experience, and much besides." It is up to you to decide what is "good reason" to believe for yourself.

Think about the questions in this book, but do so with an open mind. It is understandable if you come away with the impression that you do not have a good enough reason to believe in God. Many have come to that conclusion. And your answers to these questions might be different than mine. But we all place our very lives in the hands of people and objects for which we have very little foundation for that trust. I would encourage you to adopt no greater a burden for belief that God is real.

As we close out this chapter, I would like to address the relationship between faith and evidence. Some people may be under the impression that the kind of faith that God approves of necessarily is antithetical to evidence, as if asking for evidence first makes believing somehow less. This is far from the truth, and I'd like to ask you to indulge me a moment as I share a brief story from the life of Jesus. There is a very interesting narrative in the New Testament involving a man named Thomas, who many have dubbed Doubting Thomas. The story is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 24-29. In this story, a resurrected Jesus has been visiting with the disciples.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be

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with you.” Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.”

Thomas was in the very situation that perhaps you find yourself in: doubting a claim of something extraordinary or miraculous or supernatural. He simply would not believe that Jesus rose from the dead unless he had some reason, or reason enough, to believe. Not only did Thomas demand evidence, he demanded very *specific* evidence. He wanted to see Jesus’s hands and side, where the nails and spear went into his body. That way Thomas would know that it wasn’t a fake, that it was truly Jesus. If that person, with those exact wounds, showed up living and breathing, that would be enough for Thomas to believe.

Now at this point, it is rational to ask whether this is fair of Thomas. Shouldn’t he just *believe* regardless? Shouldn’t the word of others be sufficient? Well, for some people, the testimony of others was sufficient, but not for Thomas. He needed more evidence. But notice that he didn’t demand to see the actual resurrection take place. He simply demanded to see the risen Jesus, complete with the wounds from the nails and spear. That is certainly more evidence than others required, but it’s not going so far as to need *proof*, which is what seeing the actual resurrection take place would constitute.

What did Jesus do? Instead of criticizing Thomas for his lack of faith, he simply showed him his hands and side. *Here*, he said, *see my hands and my side? Reach out and touch them for yourself. Don’t be unbelieving, but believe!* Jesus was not against Thomas needing more evidence than others. In the classic Christian conception of God, faith need not be blind. Faith doesn’t require the absence of evidence. Faith allows for us to require certain evidence. It gives us freedom to ask questions, to ask for evidence, to explore the possibilities, and to look critically at religious, moral, philosophical, and biblical claims, in order to get

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to a point where we have good reason to believe. Of course, some people never accumulate the kind of evidence that leads them to faith.

I don't know where you are in this process, but I want to invite you into this journey. I invite you to ask these questions and to explore answers. I invite you to look critically at what I have to say, and to look critically at your own views. I invite you to ask for evidence and yet be willing to accept it if it should be given to you, just like Thomas did. I invite you to consider what is good reason for you to believe.

### *Chapter Summary*

- It is not reasonable to demand proof for our beliefs. Instead, what we should be looking for is having good reason for our beliefs.
- We all exercise faith every day, based on having good reason to do so. It should be no different just because we are talking about faith in God.
- As we move forward in this book, consider the evidence and decide whether it gives you good reason to believe.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Why Should I Believe that God Exists?

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*“He knows if you’ve been bad or good,  
so be good for goodness’ sake!”*

“Santa Claus is Coming to Town”

When I was in second grade, I woke up one morning to find that the whisky and Ritz crackers left for Santa were gone (yes, we had a little different tradition in our home), indicating that, indeed, he had shown up to bring the Vampatella children gifts. In fact, I could have sworn I saw Rudolph outside my window the previous night.

I rushed downstairs at the allowable time—sometime between six and seven—and ran into the living room where, to my joy, there were heaps of presents under the tree. Hanging from the mantle were six stockings, one for each member of the family. Yes, it was going to be a good Christmas morning for us.

As I felt my stocking, I noticed a hard object down in the toe. I tried to make out the shape and texture, but could not figure out what it was—I had never felt anything quite like it before. After a few minutes, it became clear to me what it could be. In horror, I turned to my father and tears started to run down my eyes: it was a lump of coal! He looked at me knowingly and, putting his arm around me, said, “Well, let’s face it, son, you were pretty bad this year. But just to be sure, you should probably check.”