

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT THERE IS A GOD?

INTRODUCTION You recall that last week the subject of the sermon was, "Why Bother About God?" I tried to point out to you that people bother about God because they have to. First: that there's something deep inside all of us that seems to respond to him. Second: that no matter how fast we try to go or how far we try to go, we can never go quite fast enough and far enough to get away from Him. And third: people bother about God, or they should bother about God, because God in a very deep sense has spent a great deal of time bothering about them. This past week as I began to work out the answers to the question that forms the subject of the sermon today, I began to wonder this question should have been answered before the question of last week. I'm not sure. Perhaps it should have been.

But anyway the sermon today begins with the word IF. It's a small two letter word, but a word upon which the great issues of life can sometimes hang. For instance, if there is a God, if there is a source of life that is supreme, if there is a Mind beyond the margins of mystery, a force that is not only the maker and lover of men, but also their shield and defender, their saviour and their judge, their guide and comforter, - IF there is such a God, then certainly the fact of his existence is the supreme fact of all life!

But how can I know for sure there is a God? So asks the honest, straightforward young man who's beginning to think for himself, who's beginning to move out into the deeper waters of life. How can I know for sure there is a God? He's intoxicated with the excitement of life. His world is enlarging. His mind is expanding to take in the new ideas that are confronting him. You know how it is. In his college courses he's confronted with ideas, and beliefs and opinions concerning the nature of the universe and the nature of God that are sometimes hard to absorb, and reconcile with the family religion. And so it is that the God of the family Bible is sometimes lost in the world of the historians, geologists, and astronomers. And the young man is forced to wrestle with a difficult and disturbing question, "How Can I Know For Sure That There Is A God?"

Or take for instance, a young couple who has suddenly seen their only child get sick and not recover. And baffled and bewildered by life with its moments of confusion and heartache, they began to ask themselves, "How Do We Know For Sure that There Is A God" If there is a God, why in heaven's name, did he allow this to happen to us. And so in the face of the cruel facts of life that sometimes just seem to laugh at such situations, they began to wonder about God.

You see it's a real question, and while you may not be in the mood at this moment to think about it, the chances are that at some time in your life, you may have thought about it, and I would say this too, that the chances are good that something may happen to you in later years that may cause you to wonder about this.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUESTION.. "How can I know for sure that there is a God?" The fact of the matter is this, "You can't". The fact is you can't know for sure that there's a God, at least not in the same sense that you know for sure that tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day. All you have to do to be sure of this is to check the calendar. All you have to do is to walk down 86th Street, and you'll see people wearing these unhappy looking white carnations that

have been dyed green, and you'll be reassured beyond any measure of doubt that tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day. But when it comes To God, that's a different matter.

The fact is you can't be sure that there's a God, at least not in the same sense that you know for sure that in our nation's capital there's a memorial to Abraham Lincoln. Do you see what I'm driving at? You see you can be sure of this. You can see pictures of it. You can read about it. You can talk to people who have seen it, and even as a last resort you can go to Washington and see it for yourself. But when it comes to God, and the fact of his existence, it's a little different.

You see you can't tell for sure that there's a God in that sense, but rather in this sense. For instance, take this Lincoln Memorial. There's something about it that seems to reach down inside of you. You feel beyond any measure of doubt that this memorial is the most beautiful, most perfect, most appropriate memorial that could ever have been erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln. You feel this. It stirs you. It gets inside of you. And mind you, you're not alone in this experience. Others feel it too. It confirms all that you've been taught about Abraham Lincoln. And so as you stand there in those open porticos, with undreds of other people who feel the same way you do about this, you begin perhaps to realize that there's not only a knowledge of the mind, but also a knowledge of the heart!

But now let's be honest with ourselves and carry this illustration one step further. Suppose a person should be standing next to you who can't share your feeling and your enthusiasm for this beautiful memorial. I suppose it would be very difficult to try to convince such a person that this memorial is the most beautiful, most perfect, and most appropriate that could ever have been erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln. In other words, nothing you could say or do would convince him of this. You could, I think, prove to him that it did exist, but you might have difficulty proving to him that it should exist! Suppose this person were an architect or historian, a person whose judgment you valued, and suppose he were to say something like this:

"This monument is not at all appropriate for the memory of Abe Lincoln. It's too refined. It should have been something more primitive, and crude. It's nothing but imitation classic. It should be American architecture. It should have come out of the rough prairies of the mid west"

If he were to say something like this, and you were listening with both ears, you might begin to have some shadow of doubt about this memorial being the most perfect and most appropriate memorial to the memory of Abe Lincoln.

Well, perhaps you're wondering what's behind all of this. I've been leading up to this thought. Isn't it true when you really stop to think about it, that there's a shadow of doubt about all of the great things of life. Two and two are four. We're sure of that. A straight line is the shortest distance between two points. We're certain of this. But we aren't so sure that a straight and narrow way leads to life. We have our doubts about this. In other words, the great things in life are not always obvious and unmistakable. And God, the greatest mystery

of all realities is shrouded in mystery. He withholds himself to a degree from our cold, intellectual gaze. He's not always self evident, and there are times when it's very difficult to believe in him. He isn't subject to proof the way a mathematical proposition or proportion is. He's subject to wonder and to worship. And he's too large and too vast to be caught up in any neat little theological formula. And there's no church, and no ecclesiastical system, I feel, that has completely caught all of him. For in the words of the poet Tennyson,

"Our little systems have their day.
They have their day and cease to be.
They are but broken lights of Thee.
And Thou O Lord are more than they!"

And so when a person gets all of this perfectly in mind, then I think he's in apposition to begin to wrestle with some of the answers to this question, "How Do We Know There Is A God".

WE SHOULD LOOK FOR
POINTERS AND NOT FOR
PROOFS.

Somewhere along the line in my own reading, I ~~xxx~~ came across this thought, that when it comes to the existence of God, we should always look for pointers

and not for proofs. I like that thought, and I think it's something to keep in mind as we pursue this question. This morning I'd like to suggest to you three pointers, not proofs mind you, but pointers which will help us answer out question.

First: Let's consider the beauty and the life of the natural world. Gilbert Chesterton, an English essayist of our own time, began with the grass when it came to this great mystery of God. Rather an unusual and insignificant place, I suppose, to begin. He asked himself some questions. For instance, What makes this grass grow? And why is it so beautiful? And how is it that it always seems to know just when to come up. And what an amazing variety of grass there is too. The plain, ordinary grass of the city park. The closely cropped grass of the golf course. The tall waving grass of the prairies. It's something to think about. You see that all of this points a person to something beyond. The very existence of it, let alone the beauty of it, cries out for God. And so it was that Chesterton wrote this line, "I begin with the grass to be bound unto the Lord". Perhaps that's where some of you begin. You begin with the wonders and the splendor of our physical world. I know I find it very difficult to accept the extravagance of beauty, and the perfection of nature, without assuming that there is something behind it all, something that created it, conceived it and brought it to pass. This is the first pointer.

Second: But Albert Einstein on the other hand began with another pointer. He began with the intelligibility of the physical world. You notice that different people begin with different pointers. The very fact that all of the parts of the universe seemed to fit together. The fact that when the trained and the disciplined mind of the scientist ~~want~~ went out in honest search of the truth about the world in which we live, he met another mind. It was as though the universe itself were cooperating, mind meeting mind in meaning, surrounded to be sure by a great deal of mystery, but at least finding meaning so that the movement of the stars, and the coming of the spring might be explained. Isn't it true that sometimes we just forget how much order there is in the world. There's such a great deal of consistency in the way things work, and this to Einstein and to many other people is the most persistent

pointer to a superior mind which as Einstein once wrote, "Reveals himself in the world of existence." The intelligibility of the physical world. This is the second pointer.

Third: Our third pointer leads us to a person who is a little further removed from our own time, but whose spirit nevertheless is certainly congenial to our own contemporary mind. I speak of William James, the philosopher. Back in the year 1904, a young budding philosopher by the name of James Pratt sent out a questionnaire to all of the leading philosophers of his day. Naturally he sent one to Williams James. In it he asked this question, "Why do you believe in God? Is it that you have experienced his presence?" And James replied quite honestly, "No, I haven't. But rather I need him so therefore He must be true." You see, he began with a different pointer. His own need for God was his pointer. And although he was a philosopher, he was not ashamed to say that his own realization of his own need was to him the surest clue that there was a God. Yes I think there's something in this. The inadequacy of the human soul, and the emptiness of it, reaches out for something beyond itself, and this something is God.

These then are the three pointers. There are others, and as I said, different people begin in different places when it comes to the fact of God's existence. First: the beauty and the life of the natural world. Second: The intelligibility of the physical world. Third: our own deep need for God. They're pointers, and not proofs. They may point you to God, and then again they may not.

But speaking now for myself, and I suppose I'm speaking for the majority of you. Perhaps the greatest pointer of all is Him who men came to call the Son of God. Yes, I think that Jesus is the supreme pointer of all. His whole lifetime was spent pointing men to God, pointing, as he said, "To the One who sent Me". I hope that during this Lenten season he is pointing you to the greatest of all realities, to God himself. And if you watch that pointer carefully, I think that you'll begin to ask some question. Perhaps you wonder whether such a One as He could have been bred by chance and chaos. You'll wonder whether such a love and such a spirit as His could have survived in a godless world for twenty centuries. You'll wonder perhaps whether his life could mean nothing more than dust and ashes. You'll wonder whether the Father whom He knew so intimately, and whom men see so clearly revealed in Him, could have been nothing more than a fanatic's dream. And finally you'll wonder whether that cross upon which he died, could point only to a cold hard sky. And I think this that your answers to these questions will be in the long run, your answer to this even greater question, "How can I know that There is a God?"

LET US PRAY:

Our Father, Thou art clothes in mystery and in majesty. Speak to our hearts and to our minds in the ways that mean the most to us. In the wonders of Thy world. In its order and its beauty. In our own need for Thee, and in the life of Thy Son. In this moment of quiet, as Thou art speaking to us, may we listen.....and may we leave thy house with new power and new perspective. In Thy name we pray. Amen