

**SEARCHING FOR GOD:
(1) WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ME TO SEARCH FOR GOD?**

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PROLOGUE

A woman was lonely so she bought a parrot to keep her company. The parrot, however, did not speak. So the next day she went back to the store to complain. The clerk said, "Have you tried a mirror? Parrots love mirrors." So she bought a mirror, took it home and put it in the parrot's cage. The next morning she returned to complain because the parrot still had not said anything. The clerk said, "Have you tried a ladder? Parrots love ladders." So she bought a ladder, took it home and put it in the parrot's cage. The next morning she again returned to complain because the parrot still had not said anything. He asked, "Have you tried a swing. Parrots love swings." So she bought a bird swing, took it home and put it in the parrot's cage. The next morning she returned to the shop and told the clerk that the parrot had died. "Oh, that's awful!" said the clerk, "Did he say anything at all before he died?" "Yes", said the woman, "He said, 'Don't they sell any food in that shop?'"

We fill our lives with "mirrors, ladders and swings" and ignore what is important. Consequently, we are spiritually starving. But this is an unnecessary tragedy. God has what we need.

SCRIPTURE

[The Lord says] "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

How many of you have ever searched for the Great Pumpkin? The Great Pumpkin is a holiday figure from the Peanuts comic strip. He seems to exist only in the mind of the character known as Linus. Every year, Linus sits in a pumpkin patch on Halloween waiting for the Great Pumpkin to arrive. But the Great Pumpkin never shows, and a humiliated but undeterred Linus vows to wait for him again next year.

Linus takes his mission to inform everyone about the Great Pumpkin very seriously. But few people join him in his quest. And those that do usually quit by November 1st.

We may like the story of the Great Pumpkin as a source of entertainment but if someone were to propose it as a serious quest we would likely dismiss it out of hand. If asked to give our reasons we may say something like, "This has nothing to do with everyday reality. The idea of sitting in a cold pumpkin patch all night is unappealing (if not ridiculous). And the consequences are insignificant even IF the Great Pumpkin exists."

But what if we change the proposal and asked instead, "Have you ever searched for God?"

How would you answer and why?

1. MORE THAN JUST BELIEVING GOD EXISTS

I think it is important to search for God because it means more than just believing God exists.

Most people believe in God. David Frost is a journalist and television presenter known for his interviews of famous people such as Richard Nixon. One time he was interviewing Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the well known atheist who championed the banning of prayer from schools. They began discussing whether or not there is a God. Frost found himself in the awkward position of defending faith. Now either he was unable to communicate his reasons for faith or he had never really thought about the reasons in the first place. In any case, he got so frustrated that he decided to determine the controversy by a show of hands. He turned to the studio audience and asked, "How many of you believe in God or some kind of supreme being?" Virtually everybody raised their hands.

But just because a majority of people believe something is so does not make it so. The majority could be wrong. After all, there was a time when most people said the sun went around the earth.

What is needed is an examination of the evidence. We will be considering this in more detail later in this series. But even if we arrive at the conclusion that there are credible reasons for believing in the existence of God, that does not mean our search is complete. The command to "search for God" is found in various places in the Bible and almost always addressed to people who already claim to believe in God.

A recent Harris Poll found that 79% of Americans believe in "God."¹ I wonder what kind of response the pollsters would have received if they had asked people to be more specific about the God in whom they say they believe. What if they had also asked, "Do you believe in a God who demands obedience to his law, who calls all people to turn from evil, and has a claim on your life? Do you believe in the God whom Jesus described when he said, 'true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (John 4:23)?" I think the percentage would have been considerably smaller. After all, it is much easier to believe in a vague, nameless god. A nameless god does not strain our intellect. A nameless god makes no demands of us. A nameless god does not frighten us. A nameless god can be easily ignored until needed. But a nameless god has no power to give us life. A nameless god cannot show us the truth. A nameless god cannot mercifully redeem us. Because a nameless god is not God.

¹Survey by Harris Interactive® based on a nationwide sample of 2,306 adults surveyed online between September 16 and 23, 2003.

To put it another way - Is there any difference between a person who does not believe in God and who lives life as though God does not exist, and another person who *does* believe in God but who also lives as though God does not exist? Is there any difference between a nominal atheist and a nominal Christian? The answer to both questions is “No.”

2. MORE THAN HAVING A RELIGION

I think it is important to search for God because it means more than just having a religion.

When Jeremiah told his people to search for God, they already had a religion. What they lacked was a healthy relationship with God and a practical faith lived out on a daily basis.

Most people never think very deeply about their own religion. So next week we are going to take a closer look at the different pathways people take in their journeys of spiritual discovery. We are going to try to answer the question, “Why do we believe what we believe?” My goal is to help seekers avoid the minefields of conflicting claims about religion and spirituality and help Christians realize their own spiritual style as well as better understand how we can help our friends find a faith that makes sense. I am recommending the book: *Choosing Your Faith* by Mark Mittelberg, and published by Tyndale House, as a companion to this series.

There are people for whom religion is an obstacle to faith because they regard all religions as bad, including, and sometimes especially, Christianity. They point out that great evil has been done in the name of religion and they add that the world would be a much better place without it.

And there seems to be considerable evidence to support this claim. Examples would include: the Christian Crusades (a series of armed onslaughts from Western Europe against Arabs in Palestine (both Christian and Muslim!)), the Islamic Janissaries (kidnaped Christian children raised and trained as fierce warriors and sent back to kill Christians), the forced conversion of Galileans to Judaism, inquisitions, tribunals, the denial of human rights, the subjugation of women, Protestant and Catholic strife in Northern Ireland, suicide bombers, and the religious collaboration with conquest and colonization in both ancient and (relatively) modern times, to name just a few.

Religions also fight within themselves and even if the adherents are not trying to kill each other they often quarrel and separate. Christianity is no exception. By one count, there are more than 900 denominations in the United States and the number seems to be growing.

A man was shipwrecked all alone on a deserted island. A few years later a freighter happened by and rescued him. The Captain was curious because he saw three huts on the island and so he asked the man about them. “The first hut is my home,” said the man, “The second hut is my church. And the third hut, well, that is the church I used to go to.”

I am not surprised that much evil has been done in the name of religion. Karl Barth made it quite clear that all "religions" are man-made constructs. And just as I believe that this is a created world we live in, I also recognize it is a fallen world. Since human beings chose not to follow God's will in relating to God and his world, and evil entered the world, I look for evil in the world. This means I also look for evil in religions including Christianity.

But I must also point out that a great deal of good has been done in the name of religion.

Terry Muck describes it this way:

The figures would be very difficult to come by, but the facts of the case - such as the single-handed raising of the world's health quotient and life span by Christian medical missions, and the comparative freedom and level of justice enjoyed by people living in countries that have a majority of Christian people - are enormously satisfying to those of us who passionately believe in the health and growth of the Christian church. I know that the other major world religions - Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and others - have their share of civilizing successes...Buddhist missionaries to China, Japan, and Tibet provided social stability and meditative practices that positively influence those cultures to this day. Muslim contributions to science, philosophy, and medicine are evident worldwide.

Let us recognize that religion is the most powerful force in human society. When it is good it is very good and when it is bad it is very bad. Like fire, it can be used to help or to harm. We accept the risks of fire in order to obtain the good it can provide. We must do likewise with religion.

There are, of course, people who have a positive attitude toward religion. But their journey can become confusing if they think all religions are the same. It is common in our pluralistic culture for people to say that all religions are equally valid and that all are different ways of worshiping the same God.

Now I believe that God created the world, made human beings in his image and called what he made "good." Because of this, I expect to find God's truth everywhere in the world. I also expect to find God's truth in other religions. Therefore any genuine encounter with a person of another faith means I have something to learn from them and they have something to learn from me.

C. S. Lewis expressed it this way:

If you are Christian you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the

main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the [strangest] ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view.

But it is one thing to say that there is truth in all religions but quite another to say that they are all just different versions of the same idea. If you look at the religions of the world and put their teachings side by side you will see that they contradict each other as to their highest ideals. The Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe that there is one God who created the world and is distinct from the world. Many other religions teach that God and the world are one and the same. Historic Buddhism doesn't even have a God concept. Christians believe Jesus was crucified. Muslims deny it. A thinking person would quickly see that all teachings cannot be true in what they claim. They could all be false but they cannot all be true. And this is the crux of the matter, if I may put it that way. Is there such a thing as truth?

Last summer, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit the ruins of the ancient Toltecs. The religion of the Toltecs involved human sacrifice - a captive was held against his will and drugged. Then a priest would cut out his heart. Contrast this with Buddhism. So far as I know Buddhists have never started a war. There has never been a Buddhist equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition. They emphasize wisdom, compassion, loving kindness, and personal transformation. Now if all religions are equally valid then the religion of the Toltecs is no better and no worse than Buddhism. But intuition, observation and common sense all scream against this. And I believe that the reason for this is because there is such a thing as truth and that is why we recoil in horror at the murderous Toltecs and look with sympathetic admiration at peaceful Buddhists. A commitment to truth will not let us do otherwise.

But the search for truth must be done in humility. The truth is often bigger than our finite minds can grasp. The search for truth must be done in respect. Truth ceases to be true the moment it is employed in the service of hate. But truth when found needs to be received and our beliefs and behavior adjusted accordingly. This is an important part of what it means to search for God.

3. GOD WANTS TO BE FOUND

I also think it is important to search for God because God wants to be found.

Jeremiah assures us that if we search for God with all our heart we will find him. God is our Creator but he did not just bring us into existence. He had a special purpose in mind. The Bible says:

“Long before God laid down the earth's foundation, he had us in his mind and settled on us as the focus of his love to be made whole and holy by his love” (Eph 1:4).

This is the answer to the question, “Why am I alive?” I was created to be loved by God. You were created to be loved by God. God made you to love you. And he seeks our free and unforced love for him in return.

God was not lonely. God did not need you. God wanted you. God made you to love you and wants that love to last forever. You were made to last forever. This is why the Bible tells us:

“God has set eternity in our hearts” (Ecc 3:11).

I believe this creates a spiritual hunger in each one of us - a hunger that can only be filled by God himself. I believe any of us can act on this hunger but we must seek God with all our heart. The author of Hebrews says:

“Anyone who wants to approach God must believe both that he exists and that he cares enough to respond to those who seek him (Heb 11:6 TM).

CONCLUSION

Little children love the game of Hide-n- Seek. It has been my experience that, almost without exception, it is the finding and not the hiding that thrills them. That is why after you count to 100 you begin to hear giggles and coos that give their location away. They want to be found. It is perhaps different with older children and adults. But little children want to experience the joy of being found. And being found does not end the game but starts it all over again. There is a new search and a new thrill of discovery.

So it is with God. God delights when we find him; for the first time and every time.