

**SEARCHING FOR GOD:
(4) DO I FIND GOD OR DOES GOD FIND ME?**

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February 22, 2009

PROLOGUE

It is one thing to be lost. It is quite another to act like you are not.

A young pastor was asked by a funeral director to hold a grave side service for a homeless man. The funeral was to be held at a rural cemetery with unmarked graves. He was unfamiliar with the area, got lost, but did not stop and ask for directions. He arrived an hour late. He saw the back hoe and the crew, who were eating lunch, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. He apologized to the workers for his tardiness and assured the workers that he wouldn't hold them up for long. The workers gathered around in respectful silence as the pastor did what he thought was an inspiring service, considering the circumstances. He closed with a prayer and walked to his car. As he was opening the door, he overheard one of the workers saying to another, "I ain't seen anything like that before and I've been puttin' in septic tanks for twenty years!"

SCRIPTURE

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

- Hannah Montana, a.k.a. Miley Cyrus, sings out, "Just have faith."
- Business Week magazine says, "Have faith in McDonald's."
- Martial artist Bruce Lee said, "Have faith in yourself."
- Jesus said, "Have faith in God."

There are a lot of people telling us to have faith. What does it mean to have faith? This has been the underlying question for this series on "Searching for God." Today we are going to explore an understanding of faith that avoids the minefields of conflicting claims about religion and spirituality and helps affirm a faith that makes sense.

1. FAITH AND SEARCHING

The journey of faith often begins with a hunger for something that is missing in one's life. The challenge is to look in the right place for that which will truly satisfy such hunger. Unfortunately, we often we look in the wrong places.

Just over forty years ago (1965), The Rolling Stones came out with their first international

number one hit, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction". According to Mick Jagger, who wrote the lyrics, the song is about alienation from commercialized culture, an inability to find anything authentic, anything that satisfies the deepest longings of the human soul.

I would have to say that the situation has not improved since then. Social psychologist David G. Myers of Hope College tells us in his book, "The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty," that since 1960:

"...We have less happiness, more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal contentment, less vocational security, more crime (even after the recent decline), and more demoralized children."

The things of this world cannot truly satisfy our spiritual hunger and we are paying the price for our metaphysical malnutrition. If the Bible is correct when it says, "God has set eternity in our hearts" (Ecc 3:11), then this creates a spiritual hunger that can only be filled by God himself. The French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal said:

"There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every [human being] which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God."

But having faith means more than believing God exists. Most people recognize that God exists. Ironically, it takes a great deal of faith to *not* believe God exists. British author G. K. Chesterton remarked, "Atheism is the most daring of all dogmas, for it is the assertion of a universal negative." But for many people who do claim to believe in God, such a belief makes no practical difference in their lives. The result is nominal believers are indistinguishable from nominal atheists.

Having faith also means more than 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.

I believe any one of us can experience such faith 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).

2. FAITH AND BELIEFS

Faith includes a set of beliefs about the meaning of life and how to live it. An empty faith is a contradiction. There must be a content to faith for it to have any meaning. For example, songwriter Chip Andrus can summarize what he believes with these words:

“We believe in God our Creator and in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, and in the Spirit that gives us the Word and the Love that makes us one” (Creed One).

You may have similar beliefs. But how did you arrive at your beliefs? Most people choose their beliefs according to one or more of six spiritual pathways: pragmatic, traditional, authoritarian, intuitive, mystical or evidential. As we pointed out earlier in this series, examining these approaches can help you answer the question, “Where did you get your beliefs?” But a more pressing question is, “What are your reasons for holding on to your beliefs?” Just because you assume something is true does not make it true. In *Point Man*, Steve Farrar tells this story:

The photographer for a national magazine was assigned to shoot a great forest fire. He was told that a small plane would be waiting to take him over the fire. He arrived at the airstrip just an hour before sundown. Sure enough the Cessna was waiting. He jumped in with his equipment and shouted, "Let's go!" The pilot swung the plane into the wind and soon they were in the air. "Fly over the north side of the fire," said the photographer, "and make several low-level passes." "Why?" asked the nervous pilot. "Because I'm going to take pictures!" retorted the photographer. "I'm a photographer, and photographers take pictures." After a long pause, the pilot replied, "You mean, you're not the instructor?"

You must be careful about the assumptions you make. This is especially so when it comes to faith. If you cannot come up with good reasons for holding to your beliefs or you are not sure what you believe then you owe it to yourself to further the search.

3. FAITH AND TRUTH

This is because faith must be convinced of the truth of what it believes. Unfortunately, our culture often defines faith as a blind belief in something that is unreasonable. But authentic faith is not the same as credulity. To be credulous is to believe something for no sound reason. Credulity leads to superstition. Faith, on the other hand, is established upon clear reasoning and sound evidence.

We need to be aware that each of the pathways to faith has strengths and weaknesses that may help or hinder us in the search for truth. By applying logic and examining the evidence we discover the truths—based on actual reality—that we need to let inform our choice of faiths.

Now we could take these tools and apply them to all the philosophies and religions of the world. But a simpler approach would be to start with the one person who has had more influence on what we believe about life, the world and God than any other person in the world: Jesus of Nazareth. He is the most compelling figure in history because of the claim

that he came back from the dead, that is, was resurrected. And, as I pointed out last week, there is a substantial amount of evidence that the resurrection did, in fact, take place.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ validates the person of Christ. It authenticates that he is who he claims to be. If the resurrection had not taken place then the claims of Christ are of no importance. If the resurrection did take place then the claims of Christ are of ultimate importance.

Lee Strobel was at one-time an award-winning journalist with the Chicago Tribune and an atheist. He was challenged to embark on a personal investigation of the evidence for Jesus and that investigation led him to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He has compiled his investigation in a book entitled, *The Case for Christ*, published by Zondervan. He writes:

“...my legend thesis, to which I had doggedly clung for so many years, had been thoroughly dismantled. What's more, my journalistic skepticism toward the supernatural had melted in light of the breathtaking historical evidence that the resurrection of Jesus was a real, historical event. In fact, my mind could not con jure up a single explanation that fit the evidence of history nearly as well as the conclusion that Jesus was who he claimed to be: the one and only Son of God.”

4. FAITH AND TRUST

But finding beliefs that are based on reason and evidence does not necessarily mean you have found faith. This is because authentic faith needs to respond to the truth, it needs to live out what it believes.

Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D., is the director of the Human Genome (jēe'nōom') Project. His most recent book is *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. His recognition of the limits of science and his examination of the complexity of living things led him to believe in the existence of God. But he did not stop there:

“...a search to learn more about God's character led me to the person of Jesus Christ. Here was a person with remarkably strong historical evidence of his life, who made astounding statements about loving your neighbor, and whose claims about being God's Son seemed to demand a decision about whether he was deluded or the real thing. After resisting for nearly two years, I found it impossible to go on living in such a state of uncertainty, and I became a follower of Jesus.”

The root meaning of faith is “trust.” It is one thing to believe in God. It is quite another to believe God. We cannot see God nor can we see the future. We trust God for the future based on our faith in what God has accomplished in the past. Faith must go beyond the evidence but it must not bypass the evidence. Our hope is unseen but there are good reasons for having such hope.

5. FAITH AND BEING FOUND

But when you find faith there remains yet another mystery. Did you find God or did God find you?

There was a popular story in Jesus’ day called “The Story of the Lost Coin.” Rabbis told and retold this story. The first disciples of Jesus would have been familiar with this story. One day Jesus told this story but he made some changes that yielded surprises and these surprises teach us something about what God is really up to in our world. He said:

“... Imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it—that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God" (Luke 15:8-10 MESSAGE).

The coin in this story was a silver drachma that would have had a modest value. From a monetary point of view it is hard to imagine someone going after such a coin. But there may have been an altogether different reason for the search. Jesus specifically mentioned 10 coins. In those days the mark of a married woman was a head-dress made of ten silver coins linked together by a chain. This head-dress was her permanent possession and could not be taken away from her for any legal reason. Apparently the chain broke and one of the coins was lost. So what we have here is a woman searching for the equivalent of a wedding ring. It is important for us to understand that the motivation for this search was not the pocketbook but the heart.

In the original story, the person searching for a lost coin represented someone searching after God, someone who was trying to earn God’s favor. But in Jesus’ version, the woman does not represent someone seeking God but God looking for the lost sinner! It is hard for us to imagine but in those days such an idea was inconceivable. A great Jewish scholar has said that this is the one absolutely new thing which Jesus taught about God--that God searches for us. Through this story Jesus is teaching us about the seeking love of God. Elsewhere Jesus described his mission as one who came “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

Perhaps you can remember back to a time when you found God. That's great! But the truth is, it was God who found you. This means our faith does not depend on our strength or how good we think we are. Faith is a gift from God. God deserves the credit and God will see us through. Paul says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8 NRSV).

CONCLUSION

So what does it mean to search for God? As we have seen, it means more than believing God exists or even having a religion. It means more than just holding on to untested assumptions or even finding beliefs that are supported by reason and evidence. Searching for God is a passion to find and live by the truth - truth that will lead you to a personal trust in God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is the joy of knowing that while you have been searching for God, God has been with you all along, drawing you to himself by his amazing love and grace.