

Faith and Reason

A Study and Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper

by Keith Stanglin

This video series explores why Christianity makes sense. Against a common notion that Christian faith is somehow irrational, many aspects of reality point us to God and enhance our knowledge of God. The course focuses on understanding and analyzing foundational religious issues in relation to basic philosophical principles. Topics include questions that have to do with the existence, nature, and attributes of God, as well as the relationship between God and the world.

Episode 1. Introduction: In Defense of the Faith

Summary

The first episode asks viewers to slow down and contemplate the big questions. It examines the biblical basis of this course of study—the command to be ready for a defense to those who demand a reason for the Christian hope (1 Peter 3:14-16). But when and how should one defend? The episode includes a brief survey of five arguments or accusations against Christian faith, some of which anticipate later episodes in the series.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*.

Hart, David Bentley Hart. “Believe It or Not.” *First Things* (May 2010), at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/05/believe-it-or-not>.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Plantinga, Alvin. “Advice to Christian Philosophers.” *Faith and Philosophy* 1/3 (1984): 235-71.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra Gentiles* Bk. I, chs. 3–7, at <https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles1.htm>.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the Christian hope?
2. Can you think of occasions when it would be inappropriate to offer arguments in defense of Christian faith?

3. What role should reason and arguments play in faith?
4. What are the problems with strict evidentialism?
5. Read David Bentley Hart, “Believe It or Not,” *First Things* (May 2010), at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/05/believe-it-or-not>. What did Nietzsche understand that the New Atheists don’t?

Episode 2. Faith, Reason, and Evidence

Summary

Many people assume that faith is by definition irrational. Strict evidentialists, or strong rationalists, believe that only empirical proof is sufficient to ground beliefs. Most modern atheists base their atheism on this principle. No proof, however, can be given for that principle. Many beliefs are justifiably held apart from empirical evidence. Faith is compatible with reason, and reason itself is dependent on faith.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Clifford, William. “The Ethics of Belief ” (1877), at https://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/Clifford_ethics.pdf

James, William. “The Will to Believe” (1896), at <https://arquivo.pt/wayback/20090714151749/http://falcon.jmu.edu/~omearawm/ph101willtobelieve.html>

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.

Locke, John. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

Pascal, Blaise. “The Wager,” at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/18269-h/18269-h.htm#SECTION_III, paragraph 233.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some beliefs you hold with full certainty but would be difficult to prove to a doubter?
2. Does reason play a role in your faith? How?
3. What are some questions of monumental importance that we may have initial uncertainty about?
4. Read Blaise Pascal, “The Wager,” at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/18269-h/18269-h.htm#SECTION_III, paragraph 233. What is Pascal’s explanation for the fact that some persons

find themselves unable to believe, even when they can see that it would be advantageous for them to do so?

Episode 3. God's Existence

Summary

Does God exist, and how could we know if he does? God has revealed himself in many ways, not least of which is through our reflection on nature and the world around us. This episode considers some of those ways of acknowledging God through natural knowledge. These classic “proofs,” surveyed in this episode, should be thought of as clues that point us to God.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Anselm of Canterbury. *Proslogion*, chapters 2-4, at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp#CHAPTER%20II>.

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. Penguin, 2008.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Polkinghorne, John. “A Potent Universe.” In *Evidence of Purpose: Scientists Discover the Creator*. Ed. John Marks Templeton, 105-15. New York: Continuum, 1994.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae* Ia.ii.3, at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm#article3>.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you believe in God?
2. What are some of the other arguments you have heard in favor of God's existence? Do you think they work?
3. What aspects of nature do you think point to God?
4. Read Anselm of Canterbury's so-called ontological argument in *Proslogion* 2-4, at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp#CHAPTER%20II>. In your own words, how does Anselm argue for God's existence? What are his assumptions?
5. After viewing the episode, do you understand any of the arguments better? What do you think of them?

Episode 4. Knowing God without Arguments

Summary

How do we know things—anything in life? Is it always through a good argument? Not usually. In most cases, we function properly without building a case for the knowledge we have. So why should it be any different with our knowledge of God? This episode suggests that knowledge of God's existence could be a properly basic and intuitive belief, without need of logical arguments or proof.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Evans, C. Stephen, and R. Zachary Manis. *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009. Pp. 183-211.

Lewis, C. S. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.

Plantinga, Alvin C. "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," 49-62, at https://andrewmbailey.com/ap/Reformed_Objection.pdf

———. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

——— and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Classical Foundationalism (CF) claim as the three criteria for holding a belief? What do you think of these as the only foundations for epistemology?
2. Do you think you are justified in believing you know what you had for breakfast yesterday morning? Are you justified in believing that the person sitting next to you is a human being like you? Can you prove these beliefs, right now with an argument, beyond all doubt? Do they fit into the CF picture?
3. What are some other beliefs you hold that probably wouldn't pass the CF test?
4. Where does God fit into the CF picture of things?
5. Watch the interviews with Alvin Plantinga at:
<https://publicchristianity.org/video/reasons-god-alvin-plantinga/>
<https://publicchristianity.org/video/reasons-god-alvin-plantinga-part-2/>
<https://publicchristianity.org/video/reasons-god-alvin-plantinga-part-3/>
Discuss some of the strong points he makes.

Episode 5. Divine Attributes

Summary

After establishing that God is, this episode now moves to what kind of God he is. Many discussions, non-Christian and Christian alike, err in thinking that God can be described like other beings in the universe. But Christian theology has traditionally found that negative theology—saying what God is not—gets a little closer to the truth, especially when limited by natural knowledge. As an example of thinking through these descriptions, the episode considers more closely divine omnipotence, its meaning, and puzzles often associated with the affirmation that God is all-powerful.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans*.

Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Mystical Theology*.

Hart, David Bentley. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Mavrodes, George I. "Some Puzzles concerning Omnipotence." *The Philosophical Review* 72/2 (1963): 221-23.

Muller, Richard A. *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*. 2nd ed.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we attribute anything to God? Do you prefer the positive way or negative way?
2. Which attributes of God do you find puzzling or problematic?
3. What does it mean that God is personal?
4. Does it lessen one's appreciation of divine power to say that God cannot do things which are logically impossible, such as changing the laws of arithmetic? Is it better to say that God is able to act in ways that are cruel and deceitful but chooses not to, or that God is unable to do these things?
5. Read Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia. q. xxv. art. 3, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1025.htm#article3>. When Aquinas says that God is omnipotent and can do "all things," why is it necessary for him to state clearly what is included under the word *all*?

Episode 6. Problem of Evil

Summary

The one serious argument against the existence of God is the so-called Problem of Evil. This episode examines the argument and what some believers say in response. The problem of evil is tacitly based on the reality of good, which goes a long way toward recognizing the reality of God. Still it remains for believers to explore some answers to the thorny questions raised by the existence of evil in a world created by a good, all-powerful God.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Hart, David Bentley. *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. Macmillan, 1966.

Hume, David. *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998. Part X.

Plantinga, Alvin C. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.

Donald T. Williams, "Questionable Universe," *Touchstone* (May 2009).

Discussion Questions

1. Have you struggled personally with the problem of evil? Has any suffering or evil caused you to question God or God's existence?
2. Read Voltaire's "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Toleration_and_other_essays/Poem_on_the_Lisbon_Disaster. According to this poem, what are some of the standard answers that believers give to evil and suffering?
3. What are other standard answers for evil as well as some of the full-scale theodicies offered by theists? Which ones do you think are most effective? Which ones are less effective or even unacceptable? Investigate some of the standard rebuttals to these theodicies.
4. Explain Plantinga's Free Will Defense against the logical problem of evil.
5. Read Romans 8:18. How is this a kind of answer to the problem of evil? Where else do you see this theme in Scripture? Is it a satisfying answer?

Episode 7. Miracles

Summary

Christianity is, in some ways, based on a great miracle—the resurrection of Jesus Christ—but we live in a culture that is skeptical of miracle stories. This episode takes a philosophical, reasonable approach to the question of the possibility of divine miracles and the possibility of justified belief in them. It considers and responds to David Hume’s classic arguments against miracles, which remain influential today.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans*.

Cicero. *De re publica*.

Hume, David. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Part X, “Of Miracles,” at <https://davidhume.org/texts/e/10>.

Lewis, C. S. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.

Mackie, John L. *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you define a miracle?
2. Read David Hume’s essay, “Of Miracles,” at <https://davidhume.org/texts/e/10>. What is Hume’s “general maxim” at the outset of the discussion?
3. The reported reappearance of a missing leg is the type of claim that Hume thinks we ought to reject. Are there conceivable conditions under which you would consider it reasonable to believe such a claim were true?
4. Do you think miracles stories from other religions are plausible? Do you approach them more skeptically than you do biblical miracle stories?

Episode 8. Faith, Science, and Scientism

Summary

In a day when many people assume conflict between religion and science, what is the proper way to think about the relationship between Christian faith and science? This episode reflects on the development of this relationship and different ways of understanding it, arguing that natural science has its proper place as a powerful means for understanding our world, but within a very limited scope.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Dawkins, Richard. "Science Discredits Religion." And Gould, Stephen Jay. "Two Separate Domains." Both in *Philosophy of Religion*, available at <https://www.stephenhicks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/DawkinsR-Science-Discredits-Religion.pdf>.

Daniel Dennett, "An Evolutionary Account of Religion," from *Breaking the Spell*, in *Philosophy of Religion*, at https://iweb.langara.ca/rjohns/files/2017/11/Dennett_evo_religion.pdf.

Postman, Neil. *Technopoly*.

Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Plantinga, Alvin C. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Discussion Questions

1. How does modern science pose a challenge to Christian faith?
2. What do you think of the proposal depicted in the figure (in the episode) about the relationship between faith and science?
3. How many different causes can you enumerate of how and why the signal light is red?
4. What are some of the important life questions and philosophical questions that natural science cannot answer?
5. Read David B. Hart, "Daniel Dennett Hunts the Snark," available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/daniel-dennett-hunts-the-snark>. How does Hart sum up Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*? What are two reasons why Hart sees the book as pointless?

Episode 9. Morality and God

Summary

In this episode, we consider a couple of questions related to morality and the good: How does morality point us to God? Has Christianity been "good" for human civilization? First, we reflect on the reality of a universal moral order and the source of all goodness. Atheism does not sit well with any concept of transcendent goodness. Second, we observe that even secularists should acknowledge the good that Christian faith has brought to human culture.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Ayer, A. J. *Language, Truth and Logic*. 2nd ed. New York: Dover, 1952.

Hart, David Bentley. *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Holland, Tom. *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. New York: Basic, 2019.

Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Macmillan, 1947.

Plato. *Euthyphro*.

Discussion Questions

1. Does an overarching moral order exist?
2. Can there be morality without God?
3. To what extent do you think moral beliefs are influenced by one's experience and culture?
4. Why does our secular society tend to agree that we must care for sick people and those less fortunate? How long can this assumption endure in a post-Christian culture?

Episode 10. Apologetics of Despair

Summary

Just as hope points us to God, so can despair, which is the absence of hope. Ecclesiastes provides a biblical model of how a recognition of human limits and hopelessness apart from God can lead a person to God. There is a God-shaped hole in the human heart, and humans often attempt to fill it with what can never satisfy. The human search for meaning and fulfillment outside of God is fruitless. At rock bottom, a person can more easily see the true resolution.

Books and Resources Used or Cited

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Kingsnorth, Paul. "The Cross and the Machine." *First Things* (June/July 2021).

Lewis, C. S. "The Weight of Glory." At https://www.truthseekersministries.org/wp-content/uploads/CS-Lewis_weight-of-glory.pdf.

Ochoa, Isaías D'Oleo. "Should We Read Bavinck's *The Philosophy of Revelation* as an Apologetic-of-Despair Work?" *Revista Teológica* 72/2 (Oct. 2019).

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Translated by A. J. Krailsheimer. New York: Penguin, 1966.

Discussion Questions

1. What is despair?
2. How does despair point us to God?
3. Do you think the feeling of emptiness (the “hole”) is common in our society? How do you see its manifestations?
4. Where do people tend to seek fulfillment? Read Ecclesiastes 2. Does this sound familiar? Where do we seek fulfillment in our better or worse moments?
5. Watch U2, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” at https://youtu.be/e3-5YC_oHjE?feature=shared. Do you think there is any significance to this video being filmed in Las Vegas?