The Reason for My Hope... and Peace

I’ve been struck over the years by how many people are laissez faire about their faith and relationship with God. It’s not that we don’t believe that God exists; it’s just that He isn’t an integral part of our everyday life. God doesn’t impact our decisions much; He isn’t a part of our daily relationships; and He certainly isn’t the guiding force in our lives because we tend to take personal responsibility for that role.

What’s striking about anyone who recognizes themselves in this category is the paradox of their worldview. Any rational person can logically approach their faith (or lack thereof) from two polar-opposite perspectives:

- God doesn’t exist and we are all here by some random chance and none of this “God stuff” matters much in the scheme of things. There is nothing (and no one) to integrate into our thinking, relationships and decisions. End of story.
- On the other hand, if God is real and did create our world and each of us as part of that world, then the only other logical response would be absolute thirst to better understand God’s will for our lives and His desire for us. Laissez faire seems oxymoronic to this belief.

And yet, I sense that a large number of us self-professed Christians live somewhere in between. “I believe in God but he’s kind of compartmentalized in my life.” Or, “Yes, I pray before meals and go to church most of the time but beyond that, I don’t even know how to make God part of the rest of my life.”

That’s my story. I was the workaholic, over-zealous business executive more concerned about “getting ahead” than just about anything else in my life. I was born and raised in the church and while I’ve always believed in God, He was not front-and-center in my life. If something had to be accomplished, it was up to me to make it happen. If I was ever going to retire some day, the responsibility was mine. If my kids were to grow up to be productive, self-supporting adults, we had to step up and deliver as parents. It was mostly about me and I had my hands tightly gripped around the steering wheel of life. Sound at all familiar in your life?

Then, starting 20 years ago through a series of circumstances, restless “arguments” with God, a job change, and a couple of steps of faith that required me to actually rely on God for the outcomes in my life, I began to recognize that God desires and fills a bigger purpose in my life than as a silent-bystander. He has gone from convenient Creator to central to my existence and the peace and contentment that has accompanied this faith in Jesus is hard for even me to fathom.

And therein lies the challenge – how do busy, self-reliant people like us who have learned since childhood to take full responsibility for our lives somehow adjust our paradigm to make God an active part of our decisions, our thought process, our relationships, and our heart? Far easier said than done.
Perhaps my lack of formal theological training and background makes me less credible to some. To others, maybe it’s actually a benefit, at least in part because as a struggling lay-person I have wrestled with these issues, asked these questions of God, and read more books than I’d care to admit to help me selfishly understand where God fits into my life and why that knowledge should provide hope and peace in the lives of those who follow Jesus Christ.

I don’t have all of the answers but I’ve asked most of the same questions you have at least pondered. This short paper is written for those of you who share this struggle and have similar questions about God; who wrestle with life and eternity but still haven’t reconciled where God fits in our day-to-day existence. It may also benefit the person who has written God off – either because of circumstances that have occurred in your life or because you don’t see the evidence of His presence or of His goodness. Whatever the reason, I hope this short set of thoughts will launch you on a journey. A journey that may alter your perspective on God, His role in our lives, and that I pray will give you renewed hope and a future (Jer 29:11).

Why isn’t God prevalent in our lives?

You could probably think of your own list of reasons and excuses that tend to put God on the back burner of life. Here are a few that I’ve heard most commonly:

• “I don’t need God” – which often takes on a couple of dimensions. First, there’s the person who says to themselves, “I’m surviving just fine without being preoccupied with God and I’m going to stay the course.” In essence, it’s a “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” approach to life. The second perspective, “What I need is not God, it’s a new…” (fill in the blank – new car? New job? New boyfriend?) Our “felt” needs are the real needs in our lives (vs. the spiritual needs) and they are mostly about thriving or surviving in this world.

• “God may exist but all of this religion/spiritual stuff is above my pay grade and too much for any of us to really understand.” It’s this excuse that makes “faith” so relevant and most-often lacking. Why believe in something you can’t really understand, especially when there’s not empirical evidence for its truth?

• “What difference does it make?” This is the view that regardless of whether God exists or not, “I still have to make a living; I still have to survive; I’ll deal with this ‘God’ issue when I’m closer to dying.” Sounds perfectly reasonable except that the consequences of this strategy are extreme and will last an eternity… literally.

• “Most Christians I’ve met are hypocrites anyway.” How easy it is for non-Christians to write off the whole topic of belief in God because they assume that anyone who is a follower of Christ must be flawless. In reality, Jesus didn’t come to save people who are perfect, they don’t even exist. He came to save the sick and imperfect (which includes all of us).

• “How could a good God allow so many bad things to happen in this world?” This may be the most common objection for the non-believer. The supposition is that if God really is ‘all-powerful’ that He would never let anything bad occur, to anyone, anywhere – least of all to you. And yet, given the frailty and sinful nature we all possess, the only way God could possibly remove all “bad things” in
our world would be to impose complete control over our circumstances, our choices, and even our personalities. It sounds remarkably like robotics to me.

- “The Bible isn’t believable.” This skeptic may even admit that God could exist but will argue that the Bible was written by men and compiled by men and therefore must not be “from” God but rather from people. It then becomes easy for this person to point to the hard-to-believe Bible stories including the 40 days of flood that Noah and family survived, the parting of the Red Sea, and plenty of others that aren’t easy to understand or embrace considering what we know as “normal” in our world today. Their logic continues, “If I can’t believe the Bible is true, how can I possibly know what part of God is true?”

- “God will take care of me because I am a ‘good enough’ person.” Many I have spoken with embrace this belief because it rationalizes that we’re all going to heaven when we die and it’s both comforting and seemingly logical. The evidence – have you ever been to a funeral where the service leader didn’t somehow imply that the deceased is “in a better place now”? The problem with the logic is how unfair the premise is – because none of us really know how “good” is good enough? Is it being like Mother Teresa? Or is it ok to have some bad habits/sins as long as they’re not too severe? Under these rules, we could never have certainty about our eternal future.

You may be right...but what if you’re wrong?

If you’re right in your skepticism and all (or some) of your objections are valid and God actually doesn’t exist, then congratulations... sort of. You didn’t spend time praying when you didn’t need to and you didn’t tithe and give away money that you could’ve kept for your own use. Although I struggle to think what gain actually came from being right, you still ‘win’.

On the other hand, what if you’re wrong? If you can’t really explain how the world came into existence and how our world/universe sustains itself with the incredible balance of life that it does, then the more important question to ponder is, what if God really does exist? What if He did create each of us and our world? What if our life here on Earth really does determine where we spend the rest of eternity (which sounds like a long time in my feeble mind)? The stakes couldn’t be higher to get the right answer – one way or the other.

The Pragmatists’ view

You may have hundreds of unanswered questions related to the existence of God, the Bible itself, and flawed aspects of today’s world - i.e. natural disasters and mass killings. These questions may be what prevent you from having a stronger faith in God. And yet, unanswered questions don’t usually preclude you from believing or having faith in things we’ve already learned to trust. Let’s take flying in an airplane as an example of my point. The average human has no knowledge of the Bernoulli principle applied to aerodynamics and yet most of us are comfortable boarding a plane to travel at 30,000 feet above the ground with no wires or net to catch us. Flying requires faith. So does God. We crave evidence and while there’s more evidence in support of a creator of our universe than there is for the suggestion that all of our existence was a gigantic accident, it still takes judgment and a degree of faith.
Here’s the pragmatic approach: why not live your life, even without knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt, as though God really does exist? There’s a reasonable chance you’re right and, if so, you and God become well-connected and your life becomes more purpose-filled than ever before. Even if you’re wrong, how much better would your life be today (not to mention your future trajectory) if you were less self-absorbed, more generous, more intentional about loving others, less prone to sin, more happily married, and experienced more peace than you would have otherwise?

**God wants to be in our circumstances**

Our past and our current circumstances are often the biggest determinants of our faith-related beliefs and God will use these circumstances to reach us. We tend to get so consumed with the activities of day-to-day life that we just don’t have time for God. See if any of these sound familiar as examples of circumstances that can overwhelm us personally but can also be powerful ways that God draws us to Himself:

- “The house is on fire!” – For the person in a crisis - personally, financially, and/or spiritually – they want and need relief. Like a person lost in the desert without water, they are desperate for answers to their strife and often only God can provide those answers.
- “Life is coming at me fast” – If you’re in this category you’re ‘living the dream’ (as you scramble to raise 3 kids, work full time, pay for every activity and team sport known to man – you get the picture). Life is hectic and it’s 24/7. If you’re in this category you don’t have balance in life and may be struggling to survive each month (or each day for that matter) and the treadmill of life is killing you, literally!
- “The quiet life of desperation” (as Henry David Thoreau is famous for calling it) – you may fit in this category if your life is reasonably balanced between work, enjoyment, and relationships but there’s still a sense of emptiness in you that cries out (quietly) for answers to these types of questions:
  - Why am I here?
  - What’s my purpose?
  - Isn’t there more to my life than this... work, pay taxes, and then you die?

Or maybe you’re in a different category - one that feels like God, assuming He does exist, doesn’t hear your prayers and is distant. Perhaps you just feel disconnected from the whole spiritual side of the equation. Is it the sin in my life that is holding me back? Do I spend time with the wrong people? Whatever the reasons, you want a relationship with God but it has felt impossible to connect to Him!

**God’s promises are our hope**

Regardless of which of these struggles resonate with you, there’s hope. And the hope comes when we know God’s promises to us. What promises? Here are a few of the most encouraging that come right out of the Bible:

- Rest for the weary
- A peace that surpasses all understanding
• Living in community with others and being cared about unconditionally
• Joy and contentment...regardless of your circumstances
• A secure eternal future with Him...starting now!
• That if we will seek Him...we will find Him
• That if we knock, He will answer

How do these promises translate to everyday life? Don’t think that life immediately becomes easy, but when we’re faithful in our lives to God’s will for our relationships, our resources, and our time, you’ll see a tangible difference in your marriage, in your career, and even in your finances when we live according to God’s purpose. By the way, you’ll also sleep better and with a genuine sense of peace that you may not have experienced previously. These are not only possible, they are promised when we allow Jesus to be an integral part of our lives.

Don’t take my word for it – ask God!

God and all things spiritual can be elusive concepts. You can’t physically see Him; He almost never speaks to us directly; and the Bible isn’t always easy to understand. How can you commit yourself to something so elusive?

Here’s a thought – don’t take mine or anyone else’s word for it - go to the source. Ask God to make Himself obvious to you. How do you do that? Here are a few specific suggestions that may be relevant depending on your paradigm and/or circumstances or perhaps you can come up with your own words:

• “Lord, if you’re real, and you want us to have a relationship, you need to show up! I’m not a spiritual giant who’s in touch with my own spirit and soul, much less yours. Will you make yourself obvious to me in the people, the circumstances, and the thoughts you allow to intersect my life?”
• “God, if you exist, I need your help. I’ve tried it my way for lots of years, doing what I felt like doing on my terms and by my choice and look where it’s gotten me – mostly in trouble. I struggle with relationships, with my unfulfilling career, and with too much personal debt. Other than that, I’m doing pretty well. Can you please help me grasp the concept and the power of making wise choices and do it fast – I’m drowning out here!”
• “God, whoever you are, I’m actually doing pretty well in the scheme of things. Life is good and I’ve succeeded reasonably in life without the need for a God. Is that because you don’t exist or because I’m talented and discerning enough to thrive in this world without you? I struggle most with why I need You? Is it because I’m inevitably going to find hardships? Does it have more to do with what happens to me when I die? Or is it something else? Whatever it is, if I really need you without even knowing why, will you make it clear to me where you fit in my life?”

I’m sure you get the picture and I pray that when you call out to God, He answers in some discernible way – through someone you know, with a scripture verse that is meaningful, or a circumstance that makes Him obvious. Jesus wants a personal relationship with you more than you know and will answer your plea.
Making a commitment to accept Jesus as Lord of my life

If you decide to make the decision to accept Jesus Christ into your life, how is that supposed to happen? The following prayer is a simple example of a heart-felt prayer that will allow you to take that step. This prayer is only a guide and I encourage you to share your commitment and intention with Jesus in your own words – He’s less concerned about a formulaic prayer than about your genuine surrender.

"Heavenly Father, have mercy on me, a sinner. I believe in you and that your word is true. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that he died on the cross so that I may now have forgiveness for my sins and eternal life. I know that without you in my heart my life is meaningless.

I believe in my heart that you, Lord God, raised Him from the dead. Please Jesus forgive me for every sin I have ever committed or done in my heart. Please Lord Jesus, come into my heart as my personal Lord and Savior today. I need you to be my Father and my friend.

I give you my life and ask you to take full control from this moment on; I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ."

Amen.

If you’ve taken this step, congratulations! There is no more important decision you could make in your life and God will make Himself obvious. But it’s also important that you take some important steps that help you experience God first-hand.

Some useful next steps:

- Join a church that will allow you to learn, to invest your time and talents in serving others and to be surrounded by a community of Christ-followers that genuinely care about each other for the glory of God. It’s a community you have likely never experienced previously.
- Join a small group that has people in a similar stage of life (singles, married couples, men, women, etc.). You’ll find this will be a great source of encouragement, accountability, and care that makes God’s presence “real.” Most churches today have done a great job of fostering the groups of people who can do life together.
- Spend time and energy reading your Bible. It doesn’t take more than 15-20 minutes at a time to read a few verses, reflect on what it means in your life and simply having quiet time with God. Make it consistent because the consistency is a key element of a thriving relationship – just like it is for our human relationships.
Helpful Resources:

When you offer your life to Christ you’ll likely still have questions and doubts. That’s normal! Continue to do your own investigation and study to get the answers you’re looking for and surround yourself with people who can help you find the answers. Here are a few additional resources that will help:

• *Purpose-Driven Life* – by Rick Warren and one of the all-time bestselling books in the history of publishing, evidence that there are millions of people who struggle with ‘purpose’ question.
• *Jesus Calling* devotional – a great daily devotional by Sarah Young that provides a daily, personal message from Jesus taken directly from His words and promises in the Bible. A great way to start your day in less than 10 minutes.
• *How Good is Good Enough* – by Andy Stanley which provides a short explanation of why it’s hard to embrace the notion that God will take good people to Heaven because He is a “good” God.
• *A Case for Christ* – by Lee Strobel who was an atheist attorney who set out to prove that God didn’t exist. After extensive research and reflection, Strobel actually concluded that God does indeed exist and captures his journey of discovery.
• *The Rest of the Gospel* – by Dan Stone, a Pastor who spends his entire life helping Christians understand the power of God’s Holy Spirit and how that spirit can live in and through us – every day.
• The Bible itself and here’s a few suggestions on where to start:
  o The Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John – read one chapter a day and in a few weeks you will have a better idea of Jesus’ life and teachings – all of which are relevant to us today.
  o Proverbs – life lessons and wisdom from the wisest person ever – King Solomon
  o Psalms – great prayers and verses to praise God and help us connect with Him.

Final thought

It’s your call entirely – The Bible is clear that God is waiting for you to ‘knock’ so that He can answer. If you’re not sure where to start and want to wrestle with the issues and the questions – I don’t have all the answers but I’ve struggled with many of the same questions and would be delighted to help in your walk.

The worst thing you can do? Nothing at all. Complacency will only foster a sense of emptiness in most of us and I’d rather have a disappointing answer to the most strategic life questions than no answer at all. At least you have the benefit of clarity! I pray that you will endeavor to explore and capture the *peace that surpasses all understanding!*

In His love,

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For more on my personal work and faith journey: [www.betterwaytomakealiving.com](http://www.betterwaytomakealiving.com)