

Bible Studies for Life Commentary

The Case for God's Existence

Bible Passages:

Psalm 19:1-6; Acts 17:22-29; Hebrews 1:1-2

Lesson Outline:

Nature Points to God (Ps. 19:1-6)

The Word Reveals God (Heb. 1:1-2)

My Spirit Craves God (Acts 17:22-29)

What This Lesson Is About:

This lesson presents a case for the existence of God by showing the different ways He has made Himself known to us.

Why This Lesson Is Important:

Society is becoming increasingly more secular. Even with society's increased emphasis on the material world, there is still a part of us that seeks something beyond ourselves. Believers should suggest that what we seek is God Himself. Most people who do not believe in God do not describe themselves as atheistic but agnostic. They don't deny the existence of God outright, but they are unsure if there is a God. This lesson points to four things—nature, Scripture, Jesus, and our own spirits—that point to God.

How This Lesson Can Impact Your Life:

You can affirm your own belief in God by acknowledging the ways He has revealed Himself.

Spiritual Preparation Through Personal Bible Study

Justin no longer believed. Now in college, having been raised in the church and participated in all the usual activities a committed young Christian normally participated in, he had given up his faith and was quite certain that God did not exist. We had a good enough relationship that he wanted to come and discuss his newfound skepticism. The basic reason he no longer believed was that he had become fascinated by humanity's accomplishments. Our ability to invent and control, to him, was an overwhelming proof that he no longer needed a God to explain the world. Religious belief was obsolete and unnecessary. He was thoughtful, articulate, and respectful. But he no longer believed in God.

How would you respond to Justin? Making a case for God's existence is the first task in apologetics. In this week's study passages we will learn about four pieces of evidence for God's existence. Before we proceed, however, we need to note two important matters at the outset. First, in our increasingly secular society we are liable to find a great many people who would not describe themselves as atheist but agnostic. They don't deny God's existence outright, but they are unsure if there is a God. Do not be surprised when you encounter someone like this. Second, do not make the mistake of assuming that all

doubters are angry, mean-spirited, and insulting of Christians. We must avoid any temptation to be antagonistic or dismissive. Contempt is not a virtue. As we learned in the preceding lesson, make your case with gentleness and respect. Learning the four arguments for God's existence found in the three passages of this lesson will help us make a compelling case for God's existence.

Nature Points to God (Psalm 19:1-6)

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky proclaims the work of His hands.**
- 2 Day after day they pour out speech;
night after night they communicate knowledge.**
- 3 There is no speech; there are no words;
their voice is not heard.**
- 4 Their message has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the inhabited world.**
- 5 In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a groom coming from the bridal chamber;
it rejoices like an athlete running a course.**
- 6 It rises from one end of the heavens
and circles to their other end;
nothing is hidden from its heat.**

The first and, for many people, the most compelling case for God's existence is called the argument from design. Psalm 19 is a great illustration of this point. David, the author, had lived his early years as a shepherd, spending day after day and night after night outside. He was particularly well-qualified to write of how **the heavens declare the glory of God**.

The word for heaven literally refers to that which is high. The word for **sky** is derived from a Hebrew word that means to beat or smite, as in hammering out a piece of metal, bending it, and shaping it to make a mirror-like surface. The night sky in particular looks like an overturned reflective bowl with the stars densely spread over its surface.

David was not a mere observer. Taken together, both the day and night skies **declare the glory of God** and proclaim **the work of His hands**. David saw the work of God and inferred the existence of God. To David, the beauty and intricacy of creation required a Creator. The evidence was overwhelming, for both witnesses **pour out speech** and continually **communicate knowledge**. David acknowledged that the evidence was not audible (v. 3), but was nevertheless powerful.

The last phrase in verse 4, beginning with **in the heavens** and running through the end of verse 6, focuses on the sun as a witness to God's glory. The sun is the most significant object in the sky. Even ancient people knew the sun was essential for crop growth. It too was established by God, **He has pitched a tent for the sun**, and is a part of His workmanship and a testament to His existence.

David, an ancient observer of the sky, has put into words what all of us intuitively sense: the creation points to a Creator. One very persuasive expression of this argument from design is called the watch and the watchmaker. It presents the case that if we were to find a watch in a field, far from any visible sign of human presence, we would not assume that the watch had just come together by chance. We would infer from its intricacy that there must have been a watchmaker.

Any of us with access to e-mail have probably received messages containing the most stunning pictures of stars, galaxies, nebula, and other astronomical wonders. The Hubble Space Telescope has been our newest window to the universe. The evidence it presents is breathtaking and, for most people, quite compelling. Such beauty and design must have creative intelligence behind it. The Hubble is doing for us what David did 3000 years ago. Look up and see the work of God.

We may call this evidence on the macro level; that is, the universe in its size, and nature in its obvious design, present a powerful case for God's existence. What was not available to David, but is in the same category, is evidence on the micro level in the realm of biology. I have read recently of a former well-known agnostic who became convinced of God's existence after studying the intricacy of cell design. Such microscopic evidence goes hand in hand with David's observation and reveals that God has left His signature all over creation. Even doubters acknowledge the universe appears to be tuned for life, and this naturally gives rise to the question, "who did the tuning?"

In the middle of this passage is another important insight to this argument for God's existence. The fact that the **message has gone out to all the earth and to the ends of the inhabited world** means all people have access to this evidence. This kind of evidence is called "general revelation," for the fact that God exists is generally available to all people. "Special revelation" involves the specifics of what this God is all about. We will begin looking at that evidence in the following sections.

What we should note here, however, is that the same unchanging God is the source of both general and special revelation. This observation is important because many people agree with general revelation. They believe creation points to a Creator. In fact, no more than 10% of Americans say they do not believe in God, according to various surveys over the years. The disagreement arises in the specifics. They believe God exists, but reject the other evidence we have from Scripture about what this God is like. People often try to make the Bible and science incompatible. However, if we use both good science and correct biblical interpretation then we need never see a disagreement. This conclusion should not be surprising, because God is the Source of both general and special revelation.

We have access to the same evidence that impressed David so long ago. Though the full glory of our night skies may be obscured by bright city lights, we can still take a good pair of binoculars, train them on the Milky Way, and see more stars than we probably knew existed. Even more accessible to us is all the glorious panoply of nature. From the blossoming of spring to the birth of a baby, all of nature eloquently and perpetually witnesses to God's existence.

The Word Reveals God (Hebrews 1:1-2)

¹ Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. ² In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things and through whom He made the universe.

From general revelation in the previous section, we move to special revelation. God was not satisfied to provide only a general impression that He exists. He wanted to specifically define Himself and His expectations for all people. Further, He wanted to provide a means for people to draw near to Him. This description of God's intense revelation is one answer to anyone who believes in God but is reluctant to exercise the necessary intellectual resource to discover what He is like and what He wants from people. God is not nebulous. He is quite well defined. In fact, He has spoken.

The writer of Hebrews, possibly Apollos (see Acts 18:24-28), wrote this letter probably in the mid-60s prior to official persecution breaking out in Rome. During the middle of the first century and for decades to come, church leaders attempted to define the Christian faith and defend it from false teaching of various sorts. The writer of Hebrews was particularly concerned to demonstrate that God's ultimate revelation was Jesus Christ, and that all ideas about God should be measured against His life and teaching.

He began by establishing the authority of the Old Testament, with which he was very familiar, and from which he quoted more than any other New Testament writer. Having come from a Jewish background, as evidenced by reference to **the fathers**, he embraced the traditional Jewish division of Scripture into the law, prophets, and the writings. From this middle category he began to develop his case.

He affirmed **God spoke ... by the prophets**. The prophets would have included those books traditionally identified as prophets (except Lamentations and Daniel), and the books of history (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). These latter books recounted many of the ways in which God had acted, and the prophets served as His mouthpieces to help people understand the nature and meaning of His actions. Through these **different times** and **different ways** God made His character and expectations clear.

Certainly the writer had in mind passages from the prophets that dealt specifically with the coming of the Messiah, for that truly was the chief question facing the Jewish people in the first century. Was Jesus the Messiah? But we must also take this opening verse as an endorsement of the Old Testament in its entirety. God had spoken! The written word reveals God.

Whatever objections people may raise about believing in God, the least convincing is that He somehow could be more obvious and evident. People may reject the authority and reliability of the Bible, but they do so typically with a presupposition that God does not exist, therefore the Bible cannot be His Word. This presupposition is more of a prejudice. If a person were to honestly ask, "Has this God revealed Himself?" the answer we might expect to find is that He left some writings and directions. When we look to the Old Testament and the New Testament, that is precisely what we find. The Bible, the written Word, is valid and should be considered seriously and with intellectual honesty.

The real point of the Book of Hebrews is not merely to establish the authority of the Old Testament. It is concerned chiefly to note how the Old Testament served as a steppingstone to a greater revelation. In the final chapter of history, **these last days**, God spoke **to us by His Son**. Notice how personal this address is: God spoke to *us*. He was not merely demonstrating His nature and purpose, but communicating directly to people. He did this in the most personal manner possible, by sending Jesus to reveal directly what God is like.

The two facts the writer cites about Jesus, that He is the **heir of all things** and that **through Him God made the universe**, are particularly important in making the case that Jesus uniquely revealed God. Together they emphasize that Jesus is the Maker and Owner of the universe. As such He is not simply one of “many paths to God” nor is He the first among equals. Anyone seriously interested in the existence of God must soberly look at the One who claimed to be God.

We have here an important illustration of God’s progressive revelation. Many people today look at it in terms of the evolution of man’s understanding of God. This concept puts the ball in humanity’s court, so to speak. We have to figure out what God is like, and in fact we often appear to develop our own ideas according to culture. People who engage in this unwittingly are idolaters, guilty of making a god in their own image. Against this idea is the biblical concept of God’s progressing in His self-revelation from promise to fulfillment. That is precisely the story of Scripture. God revealed Himself through actions and speech. These were recorded, and form the written Word of God. Ultimately, however, He fulfilled His revelation by coming personally in the form of His Son and revealing Himself through the living Word.

As with the written Word, people must deal honestly with the living Word. The writer of Hebrews pointed to the full revelation Jesus brought. When we look in the Gospels and discover the facts, the teaching, and the claims of Jesus, then all people are faced with three simple and direct possibilities: Was He delusional and thus pitifully wrong? Was He deceptive and evilly wrong? Or was He accurate? If we accept the latter, then we must affirm that all truth claims must be filtered through Him, and all of our religious convictions must align with His teaching.

My Spirit Craves God (Acts 17:22-29)

²² Then Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. ²³ For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed:

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD

Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it—He is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in shrines made by hands. ²⁵ Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one man He has made every nation of men to live all over the earth and has

determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live,²⁷ so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.²⁸ For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’²⁹ Being God’s offspring, then, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.

Paul’s address at the **Areopagus** [ehr ih AHP uh guhs], a high rocky outcropping that served as a place of philosophical discussion and debate, was the scene of one of the most important apologetic exhibitions in Scripture. The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers were intrigued by Paul’s claims and wanted to hear more. His presentation is a perfect example of moving from general revelation to special revelation.

Paul began with an affirmation of the Athenians’ highly religious nature, observing that they were **extremely religious in every respect**. (See this lesson’s topical study on “Greek Religion.”) Some ancient writers considered the Athenians to be the most religious of all people, so Paul was simply stating a fact without approving of it. Frankly, the same observation applies to our society. While Americans are tending to become less religiously involved, they remain spiritually interested. Things “spiritual” are very popular today, and again most everyone believes in “God.” Moving from the general concept to the specific description is where we run into a challenge.

The Athenians’ religious vitality was evident in the numerous altars and **objects of ... worship** around the city. Interestingly Paul even found an altar **TO AN UNKNOWN GOD**. The Greeks did not want to omit any god or goddess and also wanted to make certain they were not neglecting a vitally important deity. Paul used this fact as a means of instructing them as to the identity of this God **you worship in ignorance**. Paul was essentially saying, “Let me tell you about this One.” He went on to affirm that this God was the Maker of **the world and everything in it**. As a gentle rebuke to their idolatry he further observed that God **does not live in shrines made by hands**.

God is also the Author of life, having given **everyone life and breath and all things**. Every race of humanity descended from the **one man** that God created. Paul’s purpose here was to establish that all people had one origin in God. This fact set up the next important claim. The God who created everyone made them **so that they might seek God**. Paul even quoted from their **own poets** for support of the fact of our common heritage and common yearning. Everyone is looking for the same thing. God has placed in us a spiritual craving to worship something beyond ourselves. The powerful general revelation of nature has led every society about which we know to given expression to this spiritual impulse. Each of those societies sought to discover and give a name to a supreme being or power.

That impulse persists even in our present secular time and provides an open door for making our case for God’s existence. The name of this Unit theme is “The Case for Hope.” People have an innate need for hope that ultimately can only be found in God. Life is very rough and at some point it will beat up everyone to the point they will feel hopeless and look for answers and help. That time will be our opportunity to tell them about the God they always felt was there! Through a gentle and sensitive presentation of the claims for God’s existence, by working from general revelation to special revelation,

we can take them to Christ.

What is most interesting to me about this process is how many people have never given 10 minutes of serious intellectual consideration to the claims of Jesus Christ. Based on some prejudice arising from an age-old bad experience in church, or by seeing some poor example of Christianity on television, or simply because they do not want to confront the emptiness and inadequacy of their ill-formed religious convictions, people have neglected to really consider the most important matters in life. They have a spiritual craving for God, and we have the opportunity to help them find the way to fill that God-shaped void.

My young friend Justin, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, is in a stage of life where he feels very competent and insightful. He has succumbed to the temptation to construct life without faith, and has fled to the far country of skepticism. At some point, the temptation to believe will reassert itself. I believe this. My task, if God so chooses to use me in this way, will be to answer his questions and guide him back to embrace the God who never stopped believing in him.

One of the saddest truths of life is that not everyone will believe. The arguments that are so convincing to you may not persuade a person for whom you care deeply. Your task is to be faithful and be informed. Make the case accurately for God's existence by pointing to nature, Scripture, Jesus, and the person's own spiritual craving. You will not convince everyone, but you can affirm your own belief in God by acknowledging the ways He has revealed Himself.

Biblical Truths of This Lesson in Focus

- The design and beauty of nature reveal God.
- The Bible is an accurate witness to God's acts and His revelation.
- Jesus is God's ultimate revelation of Himself, and Scripture's record of Him serves as the filter through which we consider all claims for truth.
- God is the Creator of all people and has placed in them a craving to know and connect with Him.

Topical Study: *Greek Religion* (Acts 17:22)

Alexander the Great and his successors allowed conquered people to retain their religions while forcing them to adopt the language and culture of Greece. The Greeks simply adopted into their pantheon the gods and goddesses of conquered nations. By the first century A.D., the result was a wide variety of religious expressions that were often little more than unsatisfying collections of superstitions.

Additionally, ancient myths such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* usually depicted gods and goddesses as uninterested in the affairs of regular people, doting instead on great leaders and warriors. These distant deities could hardly fulfill a sincere spiritual craving. This unmet need helps explain why Christianity, with its message of a loving personal God, was so enthusiastically embraced by many.