

Sharing Your Candy

Pascal's Wager and the Benefits of Belief

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Someone said, "Telling your faith in God story is like sharing your candy with a friend". Followers of Christ should tell their story to encourage those they know and love to be "seekers" of Christ. The Apostle Paul put it this way--some "plant", some "water", and then "God makes it grow" (I Corinthians 3:6). Tell your faith-story in a natural unforced way and it will most likely be well received. However, their responses will vary. Here are several common responses:

"That sounds good for you, but that's not for me."

"I'm satisfied with my own beliefs."

"You shouldn't feel so bad about what you've done—everyone does it."

So what do we say next without sounding offensive or defensive? What can we say to keep the conversation moving in a positive direction that might appeal to their hearts and minds? What are some seeds of God's Word we could "plant" or "water" without using chapter and verse?

Pascal's Wager

Well, you don't need Biblical theological training for your response. While knowing what you believe is important, it is equally important to have experienced what you believe. In other words, how well does your belief in God hold up and work out in your real-life experience? What are the day-to-day benefits of faith in God? If belief in God is a relationship rather than a religion, then what are the benefits of such a relationship?

In the mid 1600's Blaise Pascal (1623-1663), a French Christian scholar of philosophy, science and mathematics, argued that the benefits of believing in God are so vast as to make faith in God a more rational "bet" or "wager" than unbelief. So much so that Pascal's decision theory of practical consequences informs us that the benefits of belief in God far outweigh those of unbelief. Put another way, if the atheist (unbeliever in God) is right and the Christian (believer in God) is wrong, at death the Christian has lost nothing. On the other hand, if the Christian is right and the atheist is wrong, at death the atheist has lost everything. So what are the particular benefits of belief in God that are far better for all mankind than unbelief?

To begin with I'm not a philosopher, scientist, mathematician or an academic theologian. I am theologically trained with a strong belief in God having also experienced the many benefits of such belief. I'm also convinced that the revealed mysteries of God are more than enough to satisfy my faith and live comfortably with the Divine mysteries that have not been revealed. Deuteronomy 29:29 suggests this clearly:

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."

The unrevealed mysteries of God are beyond man's comprehension anyway, which I also find rational and comforting! If man could comprehend every Divine secret or mystery, God would cease to be God and Christianity would become another man-made religion.

The benefits of belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and further revealed in the advent and mission of Jesus Christ, are vast and immeasurable. Every page of inspired revelation deepens both understanding and faith. The myriad of questions raised by mankind on every subject are best answered directly or indirectly by belief in God rather than man's best thinking or imagination. C. S. Lewis, a former atheist, sums it up this way: *"I don't believe in Christianity because I see it, but rather by it I see everything."* Christianity offers the best of all explanations. Therefore, belief in God answers far more questions than the great void left by unbelief. So for our purpose here let's consider some broad categories of benefits of belief in God.

Benefits of Belief in God

The following benefits of belief can be shared with your family and friends. Three things to keep in mind as you read them. First, they are not scripts to be memorized. Use your own words to describe your own experience of the benefits. And second, allow your listener to make their own comparisons to their present experience of unbelief. Be humbly compelling and graciously Christ-like. Never manipulate which is always offensive. Third, these are not lecture notes. Don't "dump" all the candy at once. Share the benefits of belief that naturally fit the conversation. If you lecture or manipulate, the conversation may end permanently. When you lecture or manipulate you get in the way of God's Spirit. God "brings the increase", not you. No one is argued into the kingdom of God except by the Spirit of God. You are sharing your candy. Do it well and they'll ask for more.

Creation

The first broad category of Benefits of Belief in God is Creation. All that science and exploration has discovered and will discover discloses numberless systems of enormous complexity. From the vast expanses of space to the smallest "worlds" invisible to the naked eye, everything in existence begs the question, how did it all come to be? We are left with two options of belief. One option is belief in a random accidental collision of particles from which everything came to be including all life forms including human life. The other option is belief in an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-wise Creator who brought everything into existence. Both options require faith. But which option requires the greater faith?

The benefit of belief in God as Creator is that such belief is far more rational than godless theories. The extreme enormities and intricacies in the universe and nature required an extreme intellect to create. The extreme powers observed in the universe and nature required extreme power to create. And the extreme and numberless systems and cycles in the universe

and nature required extreme wisdom to create. Paul said it this way to the philosophers in Athens:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. (Acts 17:24)

Later, Paul wrote this to the Romans:

Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:19-20)

It takes a far greater stretch of faith to believe a theory that random particles collided in a “big bang” that ultimately resulted in a universe and world that is so amazingly complex and beautiful.

Like the signature of an artist, God’s “signature” is all over his creation. After a Muslim micro-biologist came to faith in the God of Christianity he said to my friend, “*Every time I looked in a microscope I knew there was a God and that he wasn’t Allah.*” Even the invisible worlds to the naked eye are signed by the Creator. An infinite Creator has the genius and wisdom and power that leaves mankind stunned in wonderment to ask the question, “How did this come to be?” Man alone explores and discovers, and all creation begs the questions how did it begin and how is it sustained.

Creation further begs the personal questions, “*How did I come to be*” and, “*What is my destiny?*” There is greater joy in feeling and believing that your existence is “intended” rather than “unintended”. You are a member of the human race that was not accidental but intentional, with value and worth and a sense of well-being which moves us to the next broad category of benefits of belief in God.

God’s Likeness

The second broad category of Benefits of Belief in God is God’s likeness. On the heels of creation by God’s infinite knowledge, wisdom and power, God said, “*Let us make man in our likeness*” (Genesis 1:26-27). This statement simplifies two major realities. First, that God is a plurality of persons and second, man’s personhood is a reflection of God’s likeness. To be clear, man bears God’s likeness of personhood but not his Divine attributes. So the God of Christianity is not an impersonal force, but a personal Creator whom man can know and relate to. Therefore, personhood makes belief in God a personal relationship rather than an impersonal religion. Man-made religions are grounded in either fear or control or performance or a mix of all three. But a God-revealed relationship is grounded in love, trust and faithfulness.

God created man for relationship with himself and others as well. This great benefit results in countless benefits. Here's another statement made by Paul to the philosophers in Athens:

And he [God] is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, We are his offspring. (Acts 17:25-28)

Because of our shared personhood with God, man has the capacity and potential to relate to God in personal and deep ways. God loves and laughs and grieves. He's not stoic and unmoved by man's suffering. God is also angry over injustice and evil. Since He is perfect in love and holiness, his emotions are always morally pure, just and righteous. By God's pure love and holiness he desires to empower mankind to be more like him to enjoy such a relationship with him as well as with one another. He desires this in every relationship. Even man's humility toward each other reflects the humility and condescension of God toward man. Jesus said this about himself to Jewish leaders:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

There is no greater act of humility and condescension. This is also the greatest benefit of belief in God—eternal friendship! What else could give mankind greater identity, value and worth?

Conscience

The third broad category of Benefits of Belief in God is conscience. Man is internally governed by the conscience. The conscience is the delicate moral compass of the soul that instructs the mind, emotions and will. Depending on the moral decision made, the conscience registers either guilt or freedom. The impact of guilt is internal oppression and external disunity. The impact of freedom is internal peace and external unity.

So how did man's conscience come to be? In Paul's letter to the Romans he compares the Jews who were given the law to the Gentiles who had no law:

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those

who obey the law who will be declared righteous. Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them. (Romans 2:12-15)

The conscience accuses or defends—it is the judge and jury of the soul. Belief in God holds that man’s conscience is a “likeness” of God’s holiness or moral purity. A great benefit of belief in God is that moral absolutes and absolute truth is far better for mankind than relative truth and relative morality, which never benefits individuals or cultures or nations. Violation of the conscience leads to the loss of moral vitality. Over time the violated conscience grows reprobate which means the loss of feeling—the feelings of guilt, shame and regret. Truth is slowly kicked to the curb and animal-like instincts set in. The ultimate result is the many expressions of dehumanization or loss of the sanctity of human life. As bearers of the likeness of God, mankind alone possesses inherent dignity and sanctity. Whether born or unborn, every person deserves life and protection from every form of dehumanization. The reprobate conscience prefers to sanctify, humanize and even deify the rest of creation (Romans 1:21-25).

The antidote or remedy for an unhealthy and even reprobate conscience is the power of forgiveness. The central tenant of belief in the God of Christianity is that confession and repentance triggers Divine forgiveness based on faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ for sin. Such forgiveness cleanses the conscience and renews the mind, emotions and will. Such Divine forgiveness empowers the receiver to forgive and grant forgiveness to those who dehumanize them. A healthy/clear conscience is a deterrent to moral and ethical compromise. Truth and honesty are the foundation of trustworthiness and faithfulness. These personal benefits also benefit others in every network of influence be it marriage, family, employment and friendship.

Hope

The fourth of four broad categories of benefit is hope for those who believe and live in a personal relationship with God. Consider two major benefits of hope. The first is hope under God’s sovereign rule--that God rules over all of his creation to sustain and maintain it. Because God is a Spirit, he has immediate presence everywhere and is not limited by time and space. For all who love him and know him, he is always near. While his rule is sovereign, those who know him know they are not puppets on a string or robots, but have free wills to choose. The key to living under the sovereign rule of God is surrender to him. Here’s a brief first-person description of God’s sovereignty:

“God rules over all his creation, including me, by his immeasurable power, knowledge, wisdom and freedom--freedom to fulfill his purposes and promises when, where and how he chooses, governed by his infinite holiness and love for me.”

God always “...works for the good of those who love him...” (Romans 8:28). He alone defines what is good and inevitably it is the “best” according to the experience of all who love him and put their hope in him. Those who believe and surrender to God’s sovereignty experience a hope and peace beyond reason, a hope and joy above circumstances and hope for unimagined outcomes. Belief in God is a life well lived in hope because of his sovereign rule, while the unbeliever is left to positive wishful thinking when their emotions overwhelm them.

The second major benefit of hope is life beyond the grave. As bearers of God’s likeness man is the object of God’s love. So, would such an awesome loving God suddenly turn heartless at man’s death? Wouldn’t God desire an endless loving relationship in keeping with his own nature? Belief in the God of Christianity includes the benefit of hope in a life to come. This hope is made certain by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ secures man’s mortality. So Paul writes, “...whether we live or die we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). Paul asks, “O death, where is your sting?” (I Corinthians 15:55-56). The sting of death is sin accompanied by despair and hopelessness for the unbeliever. Is it hard to let go and is it hard to leave the people we love so much? Of course it is! But, as Paul puts it, believers in God “...grieve, but not like those who have no hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13). This is the common experience of all who put their hope in God--sorrow now, but a reunion in the life to come. Where is God in this journey of the believer’s death? Jesus said, “I will be with you to the end...” (Matthew 28:20). He goes with those who love him into the life beyond the grave.

Living with hope under the sovereign rule of God is capped by dying and grieving with hope in the resurrected Christ! Such hope gives inner peace and freedom.

Conclusion

The German atheist philosopher Karl Marx concluded that, “*Religion is the opiate of the people*”; but after reading the context of his accusation I would propose that it is atheism that is the opiate of those who reject God. Why? Because atheism is benign and non-threatening, asking nothing and offering nothing except the passions of pride, self-centeredness and self-destruction. Back to my earlier question; given the evidence and vast benefits of belief alone, betting on God is quite rational. Therefore, it takes far greater faith to believe in the hoax of atheism. So share your candy well with Christ-like love and compassion.