



The Contender

*The fool has
said in his
heart*

*"There is no
God"*

“I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” *Jude verse 3*



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by *Robin Compston*

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“There is no God”**

The Contender is produced by the church at Edmonton Baptist Chapel. We are an independent Baptist church who hold to the historic evangelical Christian faith.

“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’”

WHEN IT comes to attacking Christianity and the Bible, individuals like Professor Richard Dawkins are simply doing what others have done for centuries. However, many of Christianity's critics and detractors have not generated or enjoyed the media attention that Dawkins continues to command. With prime time television programmes and numerous media interviews he continues to promote his atheistic views, and his latest book, *The God Delusion*, has been in the best seller list for many months. That Dawkins in his field is an accomplished scientist is not in question, and neither is his ability to communicate science in a way that most can understand. What is questionable is whether he has the knowledge and expertise to step outside his field and make pronouncements on God and those who believe in God. In recent months it appears he has taken it upon himself to go to war with all religions, and Christianity and the God of the Bible in particular.

In the following article various arguments and statements, taken mostly from *The God Delusion*, are interacted with and written up, for the purposes of this article, as a conversation between Dawkins and a Christian. Just who is the one who suffers from a delusion? (Where page numbers are given they are referencing *The God Delusion*.)

A God to reject

The oldest of the three Abrahamic religions ... is Judaism: originally a tribal cult of a single fiercely unpleasant God, morbidly obsessed with sexual restrictions, with the smell of charred flesh, with his own superiority over rival gods and with the exclusiveness of his own chosen desert tribe. (p 37)

You would have us believe that sophisticated theologians have long since stopped taking the Old Testament seriously because it portrays God in the way you have just described. But true Christians have always regarded the

whole of the Bible as the word of God, and still do today.

Just about the only thing correct in your statement is that Judaism is the oldest of the Abrahamic religions. Right from the beginning, Abraham was called the father of many nations and told that the nations would be saved by the same promises made to him. The Old Testament continues to predict the call of the Gentiles, the prophet Isaiah in particular stressing this. Israel was God's school through which he taught the whole world. He took one nation and taught them the principle that he is willing to accept as a sacrifice, a substitute who takes our place. Not that those animal sacrifices could ever actually take away sin, but they showed what God would one day do through the death of his Son, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Sin is a sensitive subject for those who find themselves enslaved to it, and conscience will make some want to hit out against a God who dares to reprove them. Nevertheless, 'we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.' God is, and always has been, the God of all the earth.

We as a matter of fact don't get our morals from the Scripture. If we did, we would stone to death any new bride who couldn't prove she was a virgin.

Do you seriously imagine that the Bible has changed its mind about whether sexual activity outside of marriage is sinful? You have confused two things which are quite different: the moral standards of Scripture and the punishment for breaking those standards. Israel was in a unique position. They were privileged to receive instruction from God and commanded to be a holy nation. Under the law of Moses the death penalty was extended to other crimes besides murder – crimes such as adultery, blasphemy, kidnap and idolatry. When God commanded this, he showed how seriously he takes those particular sins. That special relationship with Israel has now come to an end because it was only a phase in God's programme. Israel was supposed to be a holy nation demonstrating the righteousness of God to the rest of the world. But they never lived up to that standard and God does not task the unbelieving

governments of the world with enforcing the perfection of his law on their peoples. To require them to do so would only force them to be hypocrites, as sadly Israel also proved to be. Christ revoked the death penalty for those crimes and instead showed mercy to a woman caught in adultery who repented of her sin. This was not a change in the morals of the Scripture. It was only the nature of the punishment to be administered by human justice that changed. But on the day of judgment all who have broken God's law and not repented will face eternal death.

In a sense God has made it easy for unstable minds to find fault with his word, but they do so at their peril. Let those who are inclined to rush forward in their eagerness to criticize Scripture bear in mind God's warning, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.'

Why should a divine being, with creation and eternity on his mind, care a fig for petty human malefactions?

God cares because he is holy and has an infinite hatred for sin, which is the very opposite of his nature. How can he allow evil to take place anywhere in the universe over which he has jurisdiction and turn a blind eye to it? He would himself be guilty, just as a witness to a crime who made out that he saw nothing. But God is more than a witness; he is the Judge of all the earth and his holy character compels him to mark and act against every transgression of his law. What he has threatened to punish, he cannot fail to punish.

It's just assumptions

Fundamentalists know they are right because they have read the truth in a holy book ... By contrast, what I, as a scientist, believe I believe not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied the evidence. (p 282)

I can't believe you said that. Freedom from bias and the ability to be objective are not so easy to obtain. All of us make assumptions about the world we live in. The atheist has just as many of these starting

assumptions as the Christian and therefore cannot claim to be the only one who faces the facts. You also have assumptions you are not prepared to question. You *assume* all things that exist can be explained by natural processes, without God. Believing in the Big Bang you *assume* that the whole universe has come from a single point and has spread out to form galaxies, stars and our solar system. In May 2004, thirty-three leading scientists wrote to the New Scientist protesting about the growing number of theories added to help get the Big Bang theory out of trouble. Every time it gets into difficulties, some new 'miracle' is invoked to rescue it.

You also believe in the origin of life by chance, even though man with all his ingenuity has been unable to reproduce this in the laboratory, other than to form a few basic chemicals, but nothing remotely resembling life. Yet chance has apparently been able to do what intelligent man is unable to do. The genetic code about which we hear so much today is the basis of all known life; life cannot exist without it. But where did it come from? You believe it came about by chance. But this makes no sense for scientists are busy searching for signals from outer space which will prove there is intelligent life out there. Why do we not recognise intelligence in the genetic code which is right under our noses?

Atheism is a belief system which starts with the idea that there is no God and tries to make all the facts fit this idea. It requires great faith to be an atheist because there are so many extraordinary ideas to be believed. It is then hypocritical of the atheist to complain that others accept things on faith, when he has already swallowed so much himself.

What came first, morality or religion?

Many religious people find it hard to imagine how, without religion, one can be good, or would even want to be good ... I shall argue that the origin of morality can itself be the subject of a Darwinian question. (p 211, 207)

As Einstein said, 'If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then they are a sorry lot indeed'. (p 226)

You believe that morality probably predated religion and that both are the product of evolution. You even admit that, 'on the face of it, the Darwinian idea that evolution is driven by natural selection seems ill-suited to explain such goodness as we possess'. And yet you think the basis of morality lies in unselfish behaviour seen among animals. In your earlier book, *The Selfish Gene*, you cover this subject in great detail. We normally think of natural selection as a struggle between individuals to survive and then breed, but natural selection may also make individuals behave unselfishly because even if they as individuals do not survive, their genes (or genes very like their own) will survive through others whom their unselfish behaviour benefits.

This idea does little to explain the large number of altruistic acts that benefit those not sharing the same genes as us, but anyway, what has animal unselfishness got to do with human morality, with its deep awareness of right and wrong? Do animals have a sense of good and evil? Admitting that they may at times behave unselfishly, do they do so because their conscience tells them to, because they know that unselfishness is right? No, they act as their instincts prompt them and God has put an instinct for protective care towards their young, even in some of the fiercest of animals. No animal appears to suffer any sense of guilt from stealing, though judged by human morality, they do so quite often.

If human morality came from evolution then good and evil have no meaning for they are the product of our genes and are not based on truth or any absolute standard. Any sense of duty I may feel is an illusion. We may reasonably say when challenged, 'My genes made me do it, I am not to blame'. All morality is reduced to what benefits my genes. But just how does a sense of guilt benefit my genes?

You quote Mencken who defined conscience as the inner voice that warns us that someone is looking. But the striking thing about conscience is that it can warn us when no one is looking: no one, that is, except God.

When asked how we know what is right and wrong without religion, you reply that it is common sense and then cite a case study done to test people's moral response. Most people gave very similar answers to ethical puzzles. This only goes to show that the Bible is right when it says that God has written his law on every human heart. However, it is not what

people *know* about morality that matters but what they *do*. When we judge others for the things we practise ourselves, we condemn ourselves.

It is not *the Christian* who does good only out of fear of punishment, for he has already been pardoned and has a new and much higher motive for serving God. No, it is the unbeliever who can rise no higher than self-righteousness because his life is a continual struggle with guilt and he has no experience of gratitude to God for the forgiveness of sins.

I have noticed that when it comes to discussing what atheists themselves have been capable of, you forget to mention Mao Tse-tung, who is thought to have been responsible for about 70 million deaths. Nor is it individuals alone like Mao, Stalin and Pol-Pot who are responsible, but also the atheistic ideologies their followers acted under.

Child abuse – teaching children religion

The idea that baptizing an unknowing, uncomprehending child can change him from one religion to another at a stroke seems absurd.
(p 315)

You have written about religious education and included an account from 1858 of a Jewish boy being abducted from his family and 'rescued' by the Roman Catholic church because previously a Catholic girl looking after him had panicked, thinking he was dying and baptized him herself. Isn't this another example of how you seek to incite prejudice by treating the extreme and the abnormal as typical?

You ask, 'Isn't it a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of belief that are too young to have thought about it?' You tell us that it is children's privilege to believe what they wish, and not the parents' privilege to impose it on them by force. Once again, you misrepresent true Christianity. The fact is that though it is possible to impose 'religion' on a child, no one is able to force a child to have true faith in God. Neither do Christian parents, who want their children to make their own personal response to God, attempt this. How careful Christ was to turn away those who followed him without understanding what they were doing. How anxious the apostle Paul was to avoid compelling people by sheer rhetoric to follow God. He knew that the resultant 'faith' would be of without

value.

It is indeed better to speak about 'a child of Christian parents' and rather than 'a Christian child', unless, of course, that child has exercised their own personal faith in God. This is certainly possible as God may work in a child's heart as well as in that of an adult.

But what about the cruelties atheism has foisted upon children? It has robbed them of those standards that will protect them through life. It has reduced the deep relationship of married love to a temporary contract between two independent people, often a mere physical relationship which they soon grow tired of. It has created a society of self-indulgence and self-gratification, rather than of service and responsibility. I think it's right we ask how those who have been unable to hold their own marriages together are fit to teach the world a new morality.

Is intelligent design necessary?

What makes natural selection succeed as a solution to the problem of improbability, where chance and design both fail? The answer is that natural selection is a cumulative process, which breaks the problem of improbability up into small pieces. Each of the small pieces is improbable but not prohibitively so.

The probability of evolution taking place has been compared to the probability of a monkey typing in a meaningful sentence. Given enough time, it is said, a monkey bashing away at random on a keyboard would be able to type in the complete works of Shakespeare. You, though, have set the monkey a simpler task: to type in just one sentence uttered by Hamlet, 'Me thinks it is like a weasel'. How long would this take? You agree that for the monkey to complete the task in a single step would be extremely unlikely. You calculate the odds at 1 in 10^{40} (that is ten followed by 40 zeros). However, you then argue that if the same task is attempted in lots of small steps the result is completely different. You even seek to illustrate this and suggest that the task is carried out not by a monkey but by a computer. This computer is programmed to select 28 letters at random (the number of letters in the sample sentence). If any of the selected letters are equal to the target letters (the right letter in the right

position) those letters are kept and the program continues to shuffle the remaining ones. In a surprisingly short number of cycles the entire sentence has been formed just as required. Here, you say, is a model of evolution in action.

But there are two serious problems with this illustration. First, the computer program has been told what sentence to aim at. I know you have identified this problem yourself but you do not see to what extent it invalidates your entire illustration. The program knows what letters to keep and what letters to continue to shuffle. But evolution, being a blind, non-intelligent process, does not know what it is aiming at. Birds are supposed to have evolved from reptiles, but evolution never said, 'I would like to turn that reptile into a bird. I know what new features I need, so every time a change occurs which takes me closer to my goal, I will keep it, but I will discard all other changes'. Evolution is not some god in the background, forming plans and monitoring progress.

The second problem is that the program is able to do something which evolution cannot do. The program is able to preserve those letters that match the target even though others letters are still incorrect and no meaningful sentence has yet been formed. This would be like evolution keeping some partly-formed new organ even though it offered no advantage. What would be the use of a lens forming at the front of the eye if there was no light-sensitive retina on which to project the image? Evolution works through natural selection. Those individuals or groups which survive are able to pass their genes on to the next generation, while others are not. In the struggle for life, only the fittest survive. New organs are supposed to offer some advantage, but what advantage does a half-finished eye give? This is the equivalent of your half-formed but meaningless sentence. A more realistic model would be a program which had to start all over again every time a meaningless sentence was formed and which was only allowed to reach the target through a series of meaningful sentences. Of course such a program would never finish. Many small changes are no easier than one large change as the laws of probability ought to tell us.

But how much is life able to change? Is it completely static? Some creationists have mistakenly thought so. One man famously compared a

living creature to a watch. He asked whether someone finding the watch on the ground (let us imagine he had never seen a watch before) would conclude that it came there by chance. Obviously not, said this man, for it is clearly something designed by an intelligent mind and the more carefully it is examined, the stronger this impression becomes. In the same way living things also show unmistakable signs of having been designed. However, some believed that all life had been made exactly in the form that it then existed. They underestimated the wonder of created life. God has not only created it, but built into it an ability to adapt, but only within certain limits. We can see this ability in the great variety of different dogs that have been bred from the first domesticated dogs. All that variety was hidden inside those first animals and yet no dog breeder ever produced a cat.

However these are not the sort of changes that help evolution. Dog breeders rely on the presence of existing genes, but evolution needs new genes to advance beyond these limits. According to Darwinism, these new genes come from random changes called mutations which provide the raw material of evolution. Essentially, these are copying errors which occasionally occur when a cell divides. Now Professor, you are extremely anxious to show that evolution is not a chance mechanism. You conclude this because of the wonderful mechanism of natural selection. Natural selection is like a sieve which only allows those genes to pass through which give some advantage. Creationists also admire this mechanism, but they understand that it cannot go further than the raw material provided to it. Didn't someone once ask you if you could give a single example of a mutation that has added new information to the genes? It's a rhetorical question, Richard, because I know they did; I have it on video. As I recall, after hesitating for an embarrassingly long time you finally avoided the question.

The unlikelihood of God existing

A designer God cannot be used to explain organized complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right. (p 109)

This, you say, is your big argument, the central argument of your book in fact. It is an argument based on the question, 'Who made God?', and it works like this. When we look at the world around us we see evidence for design. Life is full of complicated systems with many parts that work together. How do we explain it? In our own experience complex systems like a car engine with its pistons and crankshaft, valves and pipes, fuel delivery and ignition systems and so on – these only produce a functional engine because they have been designed to work together. Well, life too is like that, only far more so, and reaching down to the molecular level. Life is extremely improbable and therefore could not have come about by chance. There must have been a Designer who made all things.

Behind every cause, there must be another cause and so on for ever. For the Christian this endless chain of causes is terminated by God. He is the cause of everything else. You, though, object and say that if life needs an explanation because it is so improbable, God is even more improbable and so needs an even greater explanation – a God who could create this world is more unlikely than the world we are trying to explain.

There is something decidedly odd about this argument. It places God well and truly inside the world which he created, which is clearly nonsense. You seem to think that if there is a God, he too must be the product of evolution. If we start with such a definition of God it is not surprising that we see God as very unlikely. But if God created all things, as the Bible teaches, then he existed before time or space, before energy or matter. None of these things can account for his existence. Christians make no attempt to explain the existence of God. The Bible teaches that he is an infinite eternal spirit and not dependant on anything else. To expect otherwise is to mistakenly treat God as part of his own creation and subject to its limitations. Christians glory in the fact that their God is vastly greater than anything he has made. A watch must have a watch maker even though the maker is more marvellous than the watch and this universe must have a Creator even though his greatness staggers our minds. It is foolish to expect every explanation to itself be explained before we can accept it and we do not require such endless explanations in every day life.

The Anthropic principle (man's existence)

We exist here on Earth. Therefore Earth must be the kind of planet that is capable of generating and supporting us, however unusual, even unique, that kind of planet might be. (p 135)

We could only be discussing the question [how do improbable things like this universe and human beings get here] in the kind of universe that was capable of producing us. (p 144)

This is the way someone with a closed mind reasons. Having decided that there is no Creator, they say, 'Evolution must work because there is no other explanation. However many problems there are with the theory, we know it works because we are here. We realize that there are all sorts of very special things about our world, which are necessary to support life – the right temperature, abundance of water, an atmosphere which we can breathe, weather systems that are not too extreme and plants and animals to supply food and materials. Furthermore we know that the universe is fine-tuned to make life on earth possible; the sun is a stable star giving out light and energy, the earth is the right distance from the sun and protected from harmful energy by its magnetic field; and the four fundamental forces of nature are just right to make our world possible. But the unlikely must have happened because here we are to see it.'

The evolutionist asks, 'Is there life elsewhere in the universe or is this the only planet where life has originated?' You are hopeful because you think that there are so many other planets in the universe, some of them must contain life. It is suggested that an infinite number of other universes exist (for which we have not a shred of evidence). In most of these, evolution has not taken place, but we just happen to be in the one universe where it has succeeded. Therefore don't ask, 'How likely is human existence?', because you are forgetting all those other planets and universes where it didn't happen and where the question is not being asked. They too must be taken into account to get a complete picture of the probabilities involved. Since we are here, the argument goes, our universe must have been capable of producing us, therefore we are bound to see conditions favourable to life.

Yes, we are, but that still doesn't explain the origin of those conditions. To use one of your own illustrations, a man who survives a firing squad has every reason to ask why they all missed. Was it by chance or by design? The Anthropic principle explains why we are bound to see conditions favourable to life, but it does not explain how those extremely improbable conditions arose. Improbability still needs explaining, even though the human observer is bound to see it. How much easier it is to explain human existence by means of an all powerful Creator who made all things out of nothing as the Bible teaches.

God should be observable

A universe with a creative superintendent would be very different from one without. (p 55)

The God Hypothesis suggests that the reality we inhabit also contains a supernatural agent who designed the universe and maintains it and even intervenes in it with miracles ... The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question. (p 58)

Your question is basically: 'How much does God show himself in the universe he has made?' You insist that if there is a God, it should be possible to examine his work scientifically along with every other object in the world. You even describe the world as 'containing' God. This is definitely not the Christian view of God, for the Bible places God firmly outside his creation, so that nothing in this created world should be worshipped as God.

But does God intervene in the world? Yes, constantly, and yet not in a way that man can detect for the simple reason that what we see as the laws of nature are his normal government of the world. God does not run the universe by a series of miracles. According to Scripture, Christ constantly upholds the universe in existence by the word of his power. He does so in an orderly predictable way so that we can rely on a stable world.

Only on very rare occasions does God intervene miraculously. He usually does so to authenticate messengers whom he has sent into the world. At

the same time he proves that he is the maker of the laws of nature and is not bound by them himself.

Miracles are not his normal way of working however. His work is difficult to detect just because we can always find another explanation for what happens based on scientific laws, for God uses these laws to bring about his will. He is the ultimate cause behind all the causes we are aware of. Though we cannot tell how he works, we know that he has complete control of all events, for the Bible perfectly predicts the future far in advance. As the Scripture says, 'I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning'.

We will find evidence of God's work in nature, but we will not find him personally unless we come to Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the Bible, the Saviour of the world, who died for sinners. Some see God as desperately trying to prove himself to an unbelieving world, but Christ warns us, 'When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, "Lord, Lord, open for us," and He will answer and say to you, "I do not know you, where you are from." '

The nature of faith

Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence... (The Nullafidian)

Faith (belief without evidence) is a virtue. The more your beliefs defy the evidence, the more virtuous you are. Virtuoso believers who can manage to believe something really weird ... are especially highly rewarded. (p 199)

Faith, according to you, has nothing to do with evidence. It is blind faith so that on one side is faith and on the other side is a mountain of evidence arguing against it. But this picture is unrecognizable to Christians, and indeed to many who are not Christians. It can only be drawn by someone who is blinded by prejudice. Evidence, of course, has to be interpreted, but when you speak of evidence, you really mean your own interpretation of

the evidence. Listening to you, you are so sure you are right, that in your own mind your interpretation of the evidence has become the evidence itself. Let me give you an example: the rocks contain a vast number of preserved fossil skeletons. Evolutionists interpret these as a record of the progress of evolution over millions of years, but Creationists believe that they point to a global flood, which rapidly buried the many creatures alive at the time. These interpretations must be tested, but there is certainly evidence of rapid burial – the mere fact that large creatures were buried before they decayed. The absence of missing links is not easily explained if living creatures were continually being preserved as evolution claims.

Christians pay a great deal of attention to evidence from history and geography, from physics and biology, and from human behaviour and society. God is the author of logic and he does not ask us to believe anything that contradicts reason or evidence. But Christians regard God's word, the Bible, as the greatest source of truth. They trust it because they see that it describes reality, in the natural world, in human society and in their own hearts.

Are Christians more gullible than other people? Certainly not. Their faith is placed in the word of God, not in every strange claim that others make. Rather, it is the unbeliever who is the gullible one. He has to remain an optimist about human nature, believing that man is basically good and is getting better. He has to swallow the message of this world that happiness and fulfilment can be found here. He has to accept man's explanation of where we came from. The Christian tests all things and sees through this world's claims. It is true that some so-called Christians have made fools of themselves by accepting the claims of phoney miracle workers, but this error only happened because they departed from the Bible.

We gain knowledge through our five senses; we also gain knowledge through the testimony of others. We hear of places we have never visited in person, but we believe they exist. Faith is about the reliability of God as a witness to truth. Yes, the Christian believes in the existence of things he has never seen for himself; he does so because he trusts God who cannot lie. More than this, he trusts in Christ, believing that by his death on the cross he has taken the punishment for sin and that all who come to him for spiritual life will be forgiven.

How can we be certain about anything? You know only one way – through what your five senses tell you and through your thinking processes. There is no reason why you should trust these in a chance universe, yet you do. The Christian has another way of being certain. He trusts in the God who knows all things, who alone can be certain of anything and who has spoken to our world his infallible truth.

Religious experience

I suspect that alleged miracles provide the strongest reason many believers have for their faith. (p 59)

I know that you have come up with a number of different ways to explain why people have faith in God. From what you have just said, you believe that many are led to faith by seeing miracles; presumably you are talking about contemporary miracles. On this I sadly have to agree *up to a point*. This is indeed the basis of some religion but it is a very inadequate basis, for Christ points out that faith built on a constant flow of miracles will disappear as soon as the miracles cease.

In reading your book I see you also attribute faith to parental brainwashing or to the power of the mind to construct visions and visitations. You write, 'Once, as a child, I heard a ghost: a male voice murmuring, as if in recitation or prayer ... suddenly it "flipped" inside my head. I was now close enough to hear what it really was. The wind gusting through the keyhole was creating sounds ... had I been both impressionable and religiously brought up, I wonder what words the wind might have spoken.'

You also appear baffled over the case of three contemporary British scientists who believe in the resurrection, forgiveness of sins and all that. You write of a certain scientist who abandoned a promising future at a 'proper university' in order to do justice to his biblical convictions.

But you seem quite unaware that the Bible itself describes false faith and helps us to see how it differs from the real thing. True faith is not a matter of believing in things that go bump in the night, but it recognizes the utter trustworthiness of God. Only real conversion can account for men and

women being set free from slavery to sin against which they had no power. Pride, sexual lust, deceit or evil temper, which ruled us before, are set aside and the Christian is willing to suffer and make sacrifices for Christ who has given him new meaning and purpose in life.

When someone without Christ attempts to tell Christians that their experience is not real, it is like a blind man trying to convince the sighted that the experience of seeing is an illusion. The sighted pity the blind and wonder what can be done to remove their ignorance.

If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment? (p 253)

This is a good question and one that goes to the heart of the Christian message. At least you understand that a serious reading of the Bible leads Christians to teach this doctrine.

So, why can't God just forgive? In Islam, he does. But what is unique about the Christian message is that it teaches the cost of forgiveness to God. There are some things that even God cannot do. He cannot lie, he cannot break his promise and nor can he fail to punish sin. It is the measure of his love for sinful human beings that in order to redeem us from hell, God had no choice but to give his own Son in our place, to suffer our punishment. Only in this way could he continue to be just as well as merciful. The Christian praises God that his salvation was not accomplished at the expense of God's holy character.

Prayer

The physicist Russell Stannard has thrown his weight behind an initiative to test experimentally the proposition that praying for sick patients improves their health. The results, reported in the American Heart Journal of April 2006, were clear-cut. There was no difference between those patients who were prayed for and those who were not. What a surprise. (p 61-62, 63)

You obviously feel you have some incontrovertible proof with the findings of this experiment. You seem to believe that prayer has finally been proven

by scientific test to be nothing but imagination, and no sensible atheist would waste their time in making requests to God.

Now, this test involved taking 1,802 coronary-bypass patients and dividing them into three groups. Group 1 received prayers and didn't know it. Group 2 received no prayers and didn't know it. Group 3 received prayers and did know it. This bizarre experiment treated prayer as a handle that is turned to inevitably churn out results, and God as a machine that must respond with answers. It also attempted to place God in the laboratory as if his powers could be investigated by insolent doubters. We might recall how Christ responded during his trial when asked to do a miracle for Herod's amusement. He declined even to speak to him. When tempted by the devil to test God's promise to deliver him, he answered, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God.'

Some people feel that God should be so flattered when they pray, so pleased that they take him seriously enough to pray to him, that he should immediately give them anything they ask. It may surprise them to learn that there are prayers that God has said he will not answer. He won't hear the prayer of those who remain unrepentant, 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.' Nor will he will give to the man who does not ask in faith: 'let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord'. He will not hear the prayers of those who continue to resist him and who finally exhaust his mercy. He says, 'Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, because you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes ... Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD.' I know that you are keen to have your death recorded so as to prevent any false rumours about some death bed conversion, but it is a solemn question whether God would hear an atheist at the end of life.

If we wish to be heard by God, we must submit our requests to his will, we must come humbly as needy sinners and we must ask not in our own name but in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture teaches that, 'The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.' By prayer

the gospel has advanced into all nations of the world, men and women have been set free from the deepest perversions of sin and the truth of the gospel continues to be taught despite all that Satan does to prevent it. The cynical are kept at a distance by God but the righteous daily prove his power.

Atheistic comfort in death

*A philosopher points out that there is nothing special about the moment when an old man dies. The child that he once was died long ago, not by suddenly ceasing to live but by growing up.
(p 354)*

I fail to see how you think this is any comfort in the face of death. It is not even logical, for unlike the 'death' of the child that we were, the final death is sudden. There is a very superficial way of looking at death. We can try to imagine it as calm and peaceful – a slipping away into oblivion. You want to hold on to that and so quote Mark Twain: 'I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it'. But non-existence is not death, and life lost is not life never lived.

In the Bible death is called, 'the last enemy' and 'the king of terrors'. If a man approaches death spiritually asleep, he may wake up with a start when it is too late. Death is set before us to teach us, and if we will not learn its lessons then one of God's most earnest warnings has been disregarded. As John Bunyan pointed out, it is not so much death as what comes after death that we have to fear, for after death comes judgment.

There is only one remedy for death and it is he who died and rose again, conquering death for himself and for all his people, the Lord Jesus Christ. Only the Christian can boast, 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'

Conclusion

Atheism is a position that tries to set man free from any accountability to God. But amazingly, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into this world to die on the cross for many who have denied the existence of God; he

brings them to see the enormity of their guilt and to repent with shame before him. So great is his love that he laid down his life for stubborn, self-righteous and arrogant individuals who wish to banish him from the world he made and who have spent their lives trying to create a world without God. He took the punishment for their sins so that if they seek him they may justly be forgiven. For while we reject him and show contempt for him, he continues to pity us, knowing that our sinful ignorance will end in eternal condemnation unless we come to him for forgiveness. His grace towards the undeserving is beyond comprehension. He is willing to receive even atheists who humble themselves and ask for mercy, who repent of their sinful lives and trust in him. Mankind is naturally full of suspicion towards God, and doubts the sincerity of his invitation, but we have God's absolute promise that none of those who seek his pardon will be turned away. They will be blessed with everlasting life and the love of God will be poured into their lives. But let us not leave it too late to come, for we have a limited opportunity to repent and we do not know when it will end. Go to Christ, tell him what you have done, plead his mercy and if you mean it with all your heart, then he will hear you and forgive you and give you everlasting life. 🙏