

## Introduction

I'd like to begin by asking you a question I've asked myself. Are you an atheist? You probably think that's an ignorant question to ask. Of course you aren't! You wouldn't be here, worshipping God, if you were. But that isn't necessarily true. The fact is that America's churches are filled with atheists. That's because there are two kinds of atheist and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## Professing Atheists

David wrote Psalm 14 and in verse 1 mentions those who say, "**There is no God.**" We call those who do so professing atheists. Professing atheists believe and proclaim that only matter, only atoms and the molecules they form, exist. God, therefore, doesn't exist.

Atheism is an issue in America today. For one thing, atheists are growing in number. According to a George Barna poll, 11% of Americans are atheists, agnostics or have no religion at all. That's 30 million people. For another thing, atheists are growing in organization and initiative. This past Christmas season, for instance, four separate groups instituted aggressive radio, television and billboard campaigns attacking belief in God. One, American Atheists, put up billboards displaying the nativity scene. Written over the scene were these words: "**You know it's a myth. This season, celebrate reason.**" Christians no longer have the luxury of assuming everyone believes in God. Many don't.

## Why People Are Atheists

That's why we need to understand what David teaches us about atheists in Psalm 14. He begins by telling it like it is in verse 1. They're fools. The word "**fool**" here has a mental component and implies something all of us need to know and proclaim. Atheism is intellectual suicide, a point that Paul also makes in Romans 1:18-23. It requires a

blind leap of faith, blind because it's contrary to the facts. It believes, for instance, that something came from nothing or that matter is self-existent. It also believes that chance, which is a pure abstraction, caused the universe to be the way it is. But those beliefs are absurd. They violate logic, which makes them blind leaps of faith.

In his recently published book *The Grand Design*, Stephen Hawking proposes that the cosmos spontaneously generated **"from nothing."** But one has to wonder. How can nothing produce something, let alone hundreds of billions of galaxies? Atheist Richard Dawkins famously declared that theists, those who believe in God, are delusional. But just the opposite is true. It's atheists, not theists, who are delusional.

But why are they? Stephen Hawking, for instance, is considered the most intelligent person on earth. So why does he believe something that so obviously flies in the face of the facts and common sense?

David tells us in his choice of the Hebrew word translated **"fool"** in verse 1. There are several Hebrew words for **"fool"**. The one he chose, *nabal*, implies an aggressive perversity, which he defines in verses 1-4. Notice the vivid language he uses to describe what atheists in general are or do: **"corrupt," "abominable deeds," "does not do good,"** and **"workers of wickedness."**

With that language in mind, listen as I quote two celebrated atheists. One is the 20<sup>th</sup> century English writer Aldous Huxley: **"I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning; consequently assumed that it had none. The philosopher who finds no meaning . . . is concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do . . . For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness (atheism) was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political."** The other atheist is contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel: **"I want atheism to be true . . . It isn't just that I don't believe in God, and, naturally hope I'm right about my belief. It's that I hope there is God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."**

Those astonishing confessions illustrate that atheists in general believe God doesn't exist because they want Him not to. Their objections aren't nearly as much intellectual as they are moral. They want to run their own lives, to do whatever they want, without guilt and fear. But if God exists, they can't. So, they choose to believe He doesn't. Professing atheists, in other words, don't live the way they do because they're atheists. They're atheists because they live the way they do. They make the way they believe fit and sanction the way they live.

### **Professing Theists**

But it isn't just professing atheists that concern David here. It's professing theists as well in verses 6 and 7. These verses picture the wicked oppressing the righteous. But the righteous don't fret because they know God shelters them, verse 6, and will "**restore their fortunes,**" verse 7. The righteous of verses 6-7 stand in sharp contrast to the wicked of verses 1-5. The wicked believe that God doesn't exist. But the righteous believe that He does. They're theists.

Now, the belief of theists is unlike the belief of atheists. Atheism is a blind *leap* of faith. Theism is a logical *step* of faith. By "logical step", I mean this. If we do the math, if we gather the relevant evidence and connect it up rightly, we'll conclude two things.

First, we'll conclude that God *can* exist. There is no reason in the nature of things why He cannot exist. Atheists commonly point to certain realities or facts like Darwinian evolution or the existence of evil and claim they prove God cannot exist. But they're categorically wrong about that. The truth is this. There is no reality or fact we can point to and say, "**That makes it impossible for God to exist.**"

Take Darwinian evolution for instance. It's false but let's assume it's true. That would not prove God cannot exist. For one thing, it only addresses how living things came to be and how they came to be the way they are. It says nothing at all about the existence of non-living things and their intricate nature. For another thing, Darwinian evolution itself

is elaborate. The complexity and order that characterize it would actually be an argument for God. They clearly imply that someone designed and created evolution. It certainly didn't design and create itself.

There's no debating it. Nothing about the universe or life in it renders God existing impossible, improbable, or implausible. So, any objective person, with no ax to grind, will conclude that He *can* exist.

If we do that math, we'll conclude a second thing. God *does* exist. The evidence make it clear to any objective person that He does. I explained some of that evidence in a Sunday school study titled *Do the Math*. I don't have time to reiterate it now. But I'll recount an anecdote that illustrates the result of gathering it and connecting it up rightly.

Antony Flew, who died last year, was a legendary British philosopher. Until the early 2000's, he was one of the most notable atheists in the world and an outspoken critic of theism and creationism. But the developing knowledge of molecular mechanisms and DNA caused a monumental shift in his worldview. He came to believe in a creator God and explained why: **"What I think the DNA material has done is show that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements together."** In a 2007 interview, he added that his belief in a creator God was the result of **"my own insight that the integrated complexity of life itself . . . can only be explained in terms of an Intelligent Source."** Statements like those compelled the atheists who once adored him to detest him. But Flew didn't care. He simply replied: **"Well, that's too bad. My whole life has been guided by the principle of Plato's Socrates: Follow the evidence, wherever it leads."**

That's exactly right. We should follow the evidence wherever it leads. Flew is a classic case of what happens when we do. We become professing theists. We come to believe that God *can* exist and *does*.

### **Practical Atheists**

But that isn't all we come to believe when we follow the evidence.

We also believe that this God who exists is Yahweh, the God of the Bible. Again, I don't have time to explain the evidence that proves that. I can only refer you to the *Do the Math* study I mentioned before. But when we objectively follow the evidence it presents, we can and will believe that the God who exists is Yahweh, the God of the Bible.

But it isn't enough just to believe it. As the Bible and good sense demand, we must live it as well. We say that God exists and is the God of the Bible. So let's act like it. We're practical atheists when we don't. That's the second kind of atheist. The first kind is the professing atheist of verse 1, who believes God doesn't exist. The second kind is the practical atheist, who believes God does exist but acts as if He doesn't.

An analogy helps explain what I mean. Atheists live in many ways as if they aren't atheists. The belief that there is no God spins off a whole host of other beliefs, like human beings are nothing more than a chance collection of molecules or there are no objective rights and wrongs. If atheism is so, those two beliefs and others must also be so. Atheists though almost always act as if they aren't.

Francis Schaeffer met a group of bright young physicists who insisted to him that only matter exists – that God doesn't. So he asked them: **“How do you live out your atheism at home? Do you treat your wives and children a chance collections of molecules?”** To which one of them laughed and replied, **“Dr. Schaeffer, you know our lives are a dichotomy.”** He meant that they could live out that implication of their atheism in the lab, but couldn't at home and didn't.

Whenever atheists love people and treat them as objects of worth or whenever they judge something right or wrong, they're thinking and acting as if God exists. They are practical theists when they do.

That helps us understand, by way of analogy, what practical atheists are. They're Christians who are thinking and acting in some way as if God doesn't exist. The belief that He does exist spins off a whole host of other beliefs. Christians are practical atheists when they're thinking and acting as if any of those beliefs aren't so.

With that in mind, the very first belief that God's existence spins off is this. The invisible world, consisting of God and His kingdom at hand, is utterly real and ultimately important. If it is so that the God of the Bible exists, then that is also so.

Unfortunately many Christians think and act as if it isn't. A George Barna study, for instance, found that the average Christian spends nine minutes a week reading the Bible. Another study found that the average Christian spends fifteen hours a week watching television. Calculate that in these terms – nine minutes engaging the invisible world and fifteen hours the visible. It's clear which of the two worlds those Christians in that context regard as primary. It's the visible.

Christians who think and act that way are practical atheists. Don't misunderstand me. That doesn't mean that they won't go to heaven because in Jesus they will. It does mean that in this specific context, they're like atheists. They're giving primary importance to the visible world.

Our call, in contrast, is to give primary importance to the invisible world. It's to have what Dallas Willard calls "**a life beyond.**" We think and act as if God and His kingdom at hand are utterly real and ultimately important. We learn how to routinely direct our minds and bodies to God and His kingdom at hand, which we teach here at Bethel, and then do just that. A.W. Tozer sums it up well in his book *The Pursuit of God*: "**We must break the habit of ignoring the spiritual. We must shift our interest from the seen to the unseen. For the great unseen reality is God.**" We're practical Christians, not practical atheists, when we do.

## **Conclusion**

I close with an observation. The greatest distinction among Christians today is this. It's between those who give primary importance to the invisible world and those who give primary importance to the visible. Are you a practical atheist? Give primary importance to the invisible world, God and His kingdom at hand. You aren't if you do.