

Believing in What We Can't See

DAVE BAST

What kinds of questions are young Christians asking? Do our children know the basics of our shared Christian faith? Well, in the light of some profound questions asked by a class of 8th graders, it is clear to us they are trying to reconcile their Christian faith with what they know about the world around them; and they are probably not alone. So with their questions as our guide, today's *Groundwork* asks: How do we know God is real? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So Bob, what have you been reading lately?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I finished the book, *Almost Christian*. It is a book about what young people think about the Christian faith. It is a very interesting book because it says our kids – so many of our teenagers are almost Christian. I mean, they believe in God; they believe that you have to be good; they believe that when you are in trouble God is there to help you and that if you live a decent life you get to heaven when you die; but their understanding of the historic Christian faith isn't there. They are almost Christians.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is a vague sort of belief in God, but the contents of the historic Christian faith just aren't there, and many of these are kids who have been raised in church. It is a little bit disconcerting to those of us who are pastors.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is the point this book is making. The book is saying: Hey, the reason these kids are almost Christian is because the adults around them are almost Christian. I mean, they really don't know what they believe about the Christian faith.

DAVE BAST

So, there is a problem here in the way we have been teaching or passing on our biblical faith. Maybe we haven't done a good job of really explaining even what it is.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it is interesting that these same kids, I believe, are really asking the tough questions, and that really came home to me a couple of months ago. My wife teaches at a Christian school, and the Bible teacher went to her students and said: Okay, what questions do you want to talk about this year in this class? And these kids came up with fantastic questions. I mean, the big questions: How can Jesus be both God and man? How can evil exist in the world if God is good? They asked the kinds of questions that we ask as adults.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and these are 8th graders.

BOB HEERSPINK

These are 8th graders!

DAVE BAST

Right; so, well maybe we could say they are young adults. They are on the verge of exploring the world and the faith that they have been taught. We start out, those of us who have Christian backgrounds, all start out probably with our parents sort of sharing things with us – Sunday school stories and Bible stories and family devotions, maybe – and in this case, going to a Christian school. So you sort of inherit that, but there comes a moment when you begin to ask: Do I really believe it? Do I really understand it? Today's question, for example: How do I know that God is real? How do I know it's not just like Santa Claus, you know? I was told Santa Claus once upon a time was real, too. So these are the questions that kids are asking; and that is what is going to guide us in our next series of *Groundwork* programs. I am kind of excited about this because we are going to take this list of 8th graders' questions and explore them together.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, when I thought about that first question that we are going to talk about: How do I know God is real? I thought back into my own life, and I asked: Okay, how was that for me? At what point in my life did I really say, yes, I am being raised in this Christian home, but that is not enough. I have to grasp and grapple with these things myself; and I think it was about when I was 13. I came to the point of saying it is fine my parents believe it, but what about me? I have to believe it; and you know, that is kind of a scary point for kids because, you know, they want to please their parents; they want to be good kids; and yet, they simply cannot believe just because their parents believe.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is scary for the parents, too. Many of us have a fear that our children will grow up and reject the faith outright, or perhaps just drift away from it, and that makes it all the more important, I think, for us to engage in these issues when our kids are still in the home. Not terrified, not trying to squelch their questions or say: Don't ask that, or don't think that; but to explore them honestly and talk about them together. So what a great opportunity this is for us. Maybe these *Groundwork* programs that we are planning can even help families to do that – to talk together about serious questions of faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think it does underscore for me the fact that we as parents have to be willing to lay the big questions in front of our kids. You know, I think the reason why people pull their punches when it comes to the faith is because they want their kids to be Christian, and they are afraid if we really engage the big questions – the hard questions – the things that we struggle with as adults – that may throw their kids off on their faith journey; but the truth is, these kids have got these questions, and if you are not going to ask them when you are 13 or 14 or 15, I think some place along the line, like the question is God real, you are going to ask it. It may be when you are in college and you're faced with scientific teaching that challenges the Christian faith; or maybe some illness or tragedy you go through. I think all of us at some point have to say: Okay, I have been taught there is a God; is he real?

DAVE BAST

Yes; and just to focus on that and begin to attempt an answer to it, I think the first thing we have to do is to say: Now, what do you mean by God when you say is God real? Because what we are interested in is the God of the Bible; and there are a lot of images of God or caricatures of God that frankly you and I would both say *aren't* real. I don't believe in a god like that.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; I have sat with people in my office when I was working in the church as a pastor, and they would tell me about what they thought about God, and I would say: Well, you know, I don't believe in that god either. This god who is just the candyman or the god who is nothing but judgment. I mean, let's go to the Bible and let's see what God really says about himself.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so let's begin by clearing away some of the underbrush, maybe, and say that the God who is real is the God who is revealed in scripture supremely in the person of Jesus Christ; a God of justice, yes; of holiness, but also a God of inconceivable love and grace and mercy; and we need to hold those two things together and never just create a god who is all one or all the other.

BOB HEERSPINK

And we went out on our social media networks and we asked: Why do you believe in God? Why do you think God is real? And I think they had some very interesting answers; and we will come back to that just after this break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, along with Bob Heerspink; and Bob, just before the break you said we are going to bring in some of the opinions that folks have expressed on our question via our website and social media, various kinds of interactions. So, the question is: How do we know God is real? Or perhaps we could put it this way: How do we even know there is a God?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; well, it was interesting that a number of the answers really picked up ways in which people have argued for the existence of God for actually hundreds, and even thousands of years. One person posted this comment: The fact that something doesn't come from nothing and something exists, that proves the fact that there is a God. You know, the whole first mover argument, someone had to get the whole ball rolling when it comes to the cosmos.

DAVE BAST

Well, everything in existence has some kind of prior cause, right?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

You didn't come from nowhere; you came from your parents, who came from their parents who came from their parents, etc, etc, etc. Where does life come from? Where does the universe come from? What caused this thing to be? There are only two possibilities: Either there is a God who is the first cause of everything else, or everything just simply was. Either God is eternal or the universe is eternal. Those are the only possibilities, and most people tend to think it is more likely that there is a God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, then there were people who said: Okay, don't look to the past; look to the future; and it seems like everything in this world... you know, there is a purpose to it. The world seems to be going someplace.

DAVE BAST

Or you could just say: Look at the universe itself; not only where it is going but the masterful creation that seems to be... even atheists use the word *creation*. They don't believe in a creator, but this whole earth that

we live in seems to be fine-tuned in such a way just to support us. That is the way it looks, anyway; and some Christian scientists have listed all the things that had to be just right in order for human life eventually to emerge on earth. So that seems to point to a designer who planned it all and had us in mind when he created it; but the problem is, there are counter arguments to all these arguments.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, I prefer to think of these kinds of arguments as evidence for God, not a logical proof for God.

DAVE BAST

Evidence that demands a verdict?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

One of your favorite books.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you do have to say: Okay, here is the evidence; but you also recognize that there is no way you can argue someone into believing in God; and it is interesting, I find, that in Genesis 1:1 you do not start with a logical argument for God, it simply says: In the beginning, God... The Bible assumes the existence of God, and God is so great and amazing that he basically says: Look, I am not going to sit here and give you proofs. I mean, I am here, I exist. This is what I am saying to you.

DAVE BAST

I think this is hard for people... a lot of people find this hard to sort of go there, because I know in my own case, and I know a lot of Christians feel the same way, they look at this world and they say: How could you not believe in a creator? Isn't it obvious? And the fact is, no, it is not obvious to some people. For example, this fine-tuning argument, you know, that the world is just so, in order to produce human life especially...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Well, a lot of scientists say it is just so because there are an infinite number of universes, and it is bound to be that one of them ends up being just so. We don't know about the billion, billion, billion universes that aren't just so. In fact, that is called the multiverse theory – the idea that there is not a universe, there are multiverses – there are umpteen universes, so one of them just happened to produce life. And you might say, well, what is the proof for that? There is no proof for that either, is there? There is no evidence; but that is the way it is. It is kind of a toss-up – fifty/fifty.

BOB HEERSPINK

You see, I think back to my own coming to faith, where I had to wrestle with the fact, okay, do I really believe this? And I don't think I came to faith so much with that kind of logical argument. I mean, some of these things were beyond what I could think of as a 13- 14-year-old, or understand. I think for me that path really lay through coming to grips with Jesus; and to say, okay, is God real? Well, for me to answer that question I have to take into account Jesus and what he did or what people say he didn't do; and I find that very interesting because when I became a pastor later on and got into scripture, there are some verses from 1 John which I think point us in that direction. I mean, the logical arguments can take us so far, but let me just read a few verses from 1 John 4 beginning at verse 7:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us, he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is

love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

DAVE BAST

John is very honest here. No one has ever seen God...

BOB HEERSPINK

That's right.

DAVE BAST

And I think we could take that statement and from it go a step further and say: No one could ever prove the existence of God just by logic or by our senses or by what our minds can deduce. There are signs, there are evidences, the heavens declare the glory of God the Bible says; but only for those who have come to know him in a different way. I think that is what John is getting at, don't you?

BOB HEERSPINK

I think so.

DAVE BAST

What is the big word in this whole passage?

BOB HEERSPINK

It is love.

DAVE BAST

Love.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is love; and to me what John is saying is this: It is kind of like that shooting star. You know, you don't see the meteorite, but you see its path because you see the light; and John is saying when you see this divine love of God at work you know God is behind it; and at heart, he is saying in this passage, you see it in Jesus. God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

DAVE BAST

So if you want to know, is God real, or how can I believe in the existence of a God I cannot see, the Bible's answer is look at Jesus – look at Jesus. You will see in Jesus the love of God made manifest; and the New Testament is full of this; not just 1 John here, but the Gospel of John, you know. Jesus himself said: No one knows the Father except the Son, and the Son has come to make the Father known.

BOB HEERSPINK

And so you go back to look at Jesus, and through the lens of Christ you see God; and as I think about how I came to a more adult faith, I think that is how it was for me. I came to look at Jesus and say: I have to make a decision about him. Did he really do what he said he came to accomplish? Did he die on the cross and rise from the dead? When I said yes to that, it was saying yes to the fact that there is the Father God who stands beside him who has sent God the Son into the world to accomplish my redemption.

DAVE BAST

But here is a further question, Bob. Is there a way that we can help people come to know that God is real by living out the love that Jesus has demonstrated to us? Let's take that up after the break.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Bob Heerspink, and with me is Dave Bast. Dave, before our break, we were talking about the fact that, really, Jesus is a lens through which we see the reality of God; that the love of God shown in Jesus Christ establishes for us that God is real, and gives us an insight into who God really is.

DAVE BAST

Yes, we talked about some of the arguments that are batted back and forth for the existence of God. There is a further problem though. It is not just that every argument has a counter argument; the Bible clearly says that our instruments for arguing are flawed. In other words, our minds; that one of the effects of sin is that it darkens our thinking, which is why people can look up at the heavens, which declare the glory of God, and only see stuff – all they see are the flaming balls of gas, and they don't see the creator. Our minds have been affected by sin and they are no longer reliable instruments; so we will never reason our way into believing in God. God had to bring a different way, and that different way is coming in Christ and showing his love to us directly.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think the whole idea of what it means to know God – to know in scripture; it is a different kind of knowing than what we are used to. We tend to be intellectual creatures and we want to approach the knowledge of God on a very intellectual plane, but knowing someone in scripture is more relationship. It is having a relationship with God. If I know God, it is not merely being able to define his characteristics or his qualities; it is really being in a one-to-one relationship with him.

DAVE BAST

There is something of a mental game aspect about all these arguments going back and forth, and it is sort of cerebral. It is sort of detached, and that is not what God wants. I mean, God wants to have a relationship with us, and for us to come to know him in that way you have just been talking about in that very deeply personal way; and for that, it takes something more. The question is: Okay, how can I know God is real? Well, do you want to know God? That is the deeper question. It is like Jesus said to the crippled man by the pool: Do you want to be healed? And the question should be to all the agnostics and atheists and whatnot: Would you like to know God?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, it is very interesting, when we asked the question on Facebook, most people did not say to us: I know God is real because of logical argument. They began to talk about their personal relationship with him. One person said: I know God is real. I talked to him just a few minutes ago. I was praying.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a good response. Yes, how do you know anything ultimately? How do you know your husband loves you, or your wife? You know by engaging with them; and I think in the last analysis, the only way we will come to know that God is true and real and that he exists is by engaging with him. Remember Jesus' promise in the Sermon on the Mount: If you seek, you will find; if you ask, you will receive; if you knock, the door will be opened to you. I would want to say to somebody who is struggling with this question: I just don't know if God is real. Well, why don't you pray? Why don't you seek him? Why don't you ask him to make himself known to you; because I happen to think that that is a prayer that God will always say yes to.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think my advice to parents who are saying: How can I help my teenager come to grips with God? I would say: Okay, what are the faith practices in your own home? Are you reading scripture? Are you having some kind of family devotional? Do you pray? On Sunday do you say: Hey, we go together to worship. And I know that there are points at which teens begin to push back on that kind of stuff; but it is in those faith practices that we nurture the relationship with God; and yes, it is easier to roll over Sunday

morning for a teenager and say: I am not going to church; but in that practice, something happens in terms of connecting with God. I remember I had teenagers in my church school classes who said: Yes, I have been sick for three or four weeks and I haven't gotten to church and I missed it, and I couldn't believe I missed it; but they missed it because there was something happening with them even as they came to church Sunday by Sunday in terms of that relationship with God.

DAVE BAST

Good point. You know, if you want your child to grow up loving God, the best thing you can do is to love God, and let them see that kind of naturally come out; the same thing is true, incidentally, for your spouse. If you want your kids to be happy and healthy, love your spouse and let them see it, because that is the right environment.

I have sometimes said the best argument for the existence of God is the life of Christians when they are really following Jesus as they ought to. It is also the worst argument for the existence of God when Christians are not following Jesus, and doing all the things that cause scandal, and other people say look at that. Why should I believe in their God if that is the way they act?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, if you go back to that text in 1 John 4, John talks about the importance of love, and not just the love that God shows to us, but the love we return to him; and I think you are absolutely right. The question that we have to ask as adults seeking to raise the next generation of Christ followers is: Are they seeing in us the love of Jesus? Has our relationship to God changed our lives in some way? The next generation is looking for that, and it doesn't mean we are going to be perfect. The accusation of hypocrisy can be made against all of us, and I think our kids are not looking for perfection, but they are looking for authenticity.

DAVE BAST

I read years ago a little story that Billy Graham told about being in India and preaching, and he was introduced to a Hindu holy man of some kind of other, and they were talking, and the Hindu said to Billy Graham: I would consider becoming a Christian, but I've never met one. And of course, Billy Graham is standing right in front of him, and to his credit, Graham said: You know, he had a point. I understood what he was saying.

If we could begin to really live out the love of God in Jesus Christ – the love that Christ has demonstrated – we wouldn't, I don't think, have much problem with people wondering if God is real.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, I think the take-away for me from this time together is to ask myself: Okay, what am I doing to demonstrate to my family, to my neighbors, to the world, that God is real?

DAVE BAST

That God is love.

BOB HEERSPINK

And God is love.

DAVE BAST

Yes; now we are not talking about intellectual arguments, are we?

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is it for today. Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you participating that will keep our topics relevant; and actually, today you have given us a lot of material to share on the program. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or

passages, or respond to the questions we are posting online, for future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/believing-in-what-we-cant-see>

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