

A Word from Woody . . .
“Pascal’s Pager”

The 17th century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal is well-known for his intellect and Christian faith. One of his best known insights is called, “Pascal’s wager”, which is essentially a way of looking at belief in God. If one believes in God and He actually does exist, then the person has infinite blessing; and if one does not believe in God and He actually does exist, then one has infinite hardship. When one looks at the advantages and disadvantages of the wager whether to believe in God, one is looking at infinite gain (if one believes in Him and He exists) compared to virtually no losses (if one believes in God and He does not exist). There is another saying, however, I would like to examine which I call “Pascal’s Pager”.

Those of us who are “old school” remember that a pager was a wireless telecommunication device one carries in a purse or on a belt that displays a message, like a voice message or phone number. Ever since I heard Pascal’s statement quoted by Dr. Robert Stewart at our Winter Retreat I have felt almost as if Pascal himself—or better, the Holy Spirit -- has been paging me reminders to consider his statement more deeply: “In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't.” We do well to unpack two aspects of this insightful statement.

First, “Pascal’s Pager” helps us address a frequent question of the skeptic to the believer: “If God exists, why doesn’t He make Himself obvious?” The answer is that God has provided enough evidence for those who want to believe in Him. In Jeremiah 29:13 God said, “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me”. A similar promise is found in Deuteronomy 4:29. What evidence has God provided the skeptic who would like to find God? A few come to mind. The existence of life itself is far better explained by an Intelligence, like God, rather than a lifeless, mindless, unguided Universe of matter. Even if one day scientists can “create” life in a laboratory, all that shows is that intelligence and controlled conditions are certainly needed to form life. The same goes for the undeniable existence of good and evil, which recorded history has shown to drive the passions of humanity. If the Universe is responsible for our existence, then all one can point to is the datum that people are passionate about

what is good and what is evil, but can say nothing about whether this datum has significance or points to anything like “Truth”. The piece of information that “Jimmy stole a car” becomes of equal significance to “my elbow itches”. And similar things can be said of the mystery of human consciousness, which seems to be connected to but not a part of the material Universe. Once the skeptic believes in God, I highly encourage the person to examine the person Jesus, especially His teaching, death, and resurrection. If one wants to believe, there are excellent reasons to believe in God, and then to discover that that God is found in Christianity.

Second, “Pascal’s Pager” addresses the frequent question of the believer to the skeptic: “What evidence will compel you to believe in God?” One of the greatest “shadows” blinding skeptics is the problem of evil. This problem cannot be ignored. It is of enormous significance not only for modern people, but also for those from ancient of days. It has always been of interest, and comfort, to me to know that the early Church knew well the problem of evil—unjust beatings, rejection by others, famines, illnesses, death, etc.—and yet still held firmly to the belief in God’s goodness. They also held that God will indeed address injustices—whether in this world or the next.

However, unfortunately, the answer to what will compel the skeptic to believe in God is often, “Nothing”. I am reminded of an exchange Robert Lawrence Kuhn had on his PBS show “Closer to Truth” (episode 1103) with the publisher of *Skeptic Magazine* Dr. Michael Shermer.

Kuhn: “. . . the fundamental question is, is there anything that exists, God, extraterrestrial civilization, anything that is beyond the physical as we know it or can conceive it today?”

Shermer: “Well, I would have to honestly answer it, I don’t know and neither do you. And nobody does, it isn’t possible to know.”

It was that last statement by Shermer that is especially significant for the unrelenting skeptic on whether God exists—“it isn’t possible to know”. This seems to me to be unduly—and unacceptably-- skeptical. It is as though the only evidence allowed for God’s existence comes from what science reveals. But science, while extremely helpful in understanding our universe and telling us what is, is quite limited. Science cannot tell us our parents or spouses love us, or that

poisoning our enemy's food is wrong. Paul's words of warning of nearly 2,000 years ago require heeding: "For what can be known about God is plain to them [who suppress truth], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." (Romans 1:19-25).

I believe that Pascal—or better, the Holy Spirit—is paging us today during Lent. Not only are we being asked whether we really want to believe in God and His Son Jesus. We are also asked by the Lord to share this Good News with a world in need—a world that very often has the “want” to believe. We do well this Lent to pay attention to Pascal's wise insight!

Love,

Woody