

## **Believing What We Want**

### **By David Feddes**

We believe what we want. When we don't believe in God, it's because we don't want him. The biggest barrier to knowing God is not lack of evidence but lack of desire. Until the heart loves God, the mind avoids him.

Thomas Nagel doesn't believe in God. Professor Nagel teaches philosophy and law at New York University. He has degrees from Oxford and Harvard. He admits that some things may point to God's reality, but Thomas Nagel wants God not to exist, and he believes what he wants. He says,

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God... It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.

Professor Nagel says he has a "cosmic authority problem." He doesn't want a world where everything owes its existence to God and where everyone must answer to God. He thinks others have a similar authority problem. They use "evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind," says Nagel. These explanations often defy common sense, but they are appealing because they eliminate God from the picture. Nagel says, "Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world."

Harvard biologist Richard Lewinton rejects God not because of evidence or logic but because of what he calls "a prior commitment." Lewinton says, "Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural." Why choose a godless theory that sounds far-fetched instead of ideas of divine design and purpose? Because God is ruled out from the start. This commitment "is absolute," says Lewinton, "for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door."

Unbelief is not based on evidence but on choosing a basic stance before considering any evidence. First the heart dislikes God; then the mind explains God away. We believe what we want.

### **Avoiding Authority**

Not all of us are prominent professors, but many of us do have a "cosmic authority problem." Not many of us are committed atheists, but atheism isn't the only way to avoid God as an authority figure. There are other ways to believe what we want.

One is deism. In deism you assume that a god of some sort exists and got the world going, but now he leaves things to take their course. God might exist, but he ignores you, and you can safely ignore him—no need to think about God, no need to get to know him, no need to obey him. The Bible describes this kind of thinking in Psalm 10. "In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God... He says to himself, 'God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees'" (Psalm 10:4,11). If you think God is real but you want to do as you please, you may like the god of deism much better than the God of the Bible. And you believe what you want.

But maybe you don't want to be alone in the universe. You don't want the non-existent god of atheism or the uninvolved god of deism. You want a god who is there for you, who makes

you feel better and helps you out when you need it, but who lets you do as you please and doesn't try to change your life. You want a god who thinks the way you do and is pretty much like you. So you believe what you want. In Psalm 50 God says, "You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you... you thought I was altogether like you" (Psalm 50:17,21). Rather than seek to know God as he is, you assume he approves you the way you are. Rather than find in the Bible what God wants, you assume your preferences are his will. You believe what you want.

These are some of the ways we try to avoid the real God of the Bible. Atheism tries to get rid of God. Deism tries to keep God at a distance. Made-up religion tries to redesign God. The driving force of all this is the "cosmic authority problem" Thomas Nagel spoke of. Many of us aren't as honest as Nagel was when he said, "I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that." But whether we're honest about it or not, we still have a "cosmic authority problem." The Bible says, "You were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior" (Colossians 1:21). Jesus says, "Men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

When we do wrong, our chief problem is not that we don't *know* what God wants but that we don't *want* what God wants. We just plain don't like the God of the Bible. We especially don't like his authority. We don't like his authority to command obedience. We don't like his authority to run the world in ways that don't fit our ideas. We don't like his authority to decide our destiny. We fear that God would limit our freedom, stifle our thinking, and ruin our fun. We don't want a universe where the Supreme Being is who the Bible says he is. We want to run our own lives. So we rebel, and we believe what we want.

### **Enjoying Authority**

To believe in the living God, we don't need more data or persuasion nearly as much as we need to get over dislike of God and of what God stands for. Somehow we must see God's authority as a good thing, not as a joy-wrecker. Only when we know how delightful God is can we believe how real he is. Only when we prize God's character and his ways can we truly know him. The mind accepts what the heart desires. We believe what we want.

The longest chapter of the Bible, Psalm 119, is about God's authority. The writer of Psalm 119 finds his greatest joy in knowing God and living under his authority. He says to the Lord, "You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees" (Psalm 119:68). When he uses the word "good," he doesn't just mean decent and well behaved. He means good in the sense that a meal is good (it's delicious and healthy) or in the sense that a story is good (it's gripping and insightful) or in the sense that an investment is good (it's reliable and yields a generous return). God is good, what he does is good, and his authority is good for us: delicious, healthy, gripping, insightful, reliable, and rewarding. Psalm 119 says, "Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart" (v. 111).

If you prefer God to stay out of your affairs and want no authority but your own, you won't feel what the author of Psalm 119 felt, you won't want what he wanted, and you won't believe what he believed. But if you're willing to listen further to someone who enjoyed God and enjoyed living under his authority, God's Holy Spirit can stir in you a desire for God, a delight in his authority, and a living belief in him. Psalm 119:18 says, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."

Psalm 119 expresses delight in God and desire to know God even better and to be more in tune with his authority. Psalm 119 starts by saying, "Blessed are they whose ways are

blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart” (Psalm 119:2). Why is it a blessing to live under God’s authority? One reason is simply that this is to be in touch with reality. God is the supreme being; you’re not. God’s authority directs the universe; you don’t. Jesus came to earth preaching the kingdom of God, his authority and kingship, directing and blessing our lives. If you believe that good news and live gladly under Christ’s kingship, you will soar higher. If you ignore God’s authority, you will crash and burn.

“A pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent—and flew straight into the ground. She was unaware that she had been flying upside down. This is a parable of human existence in our times,” writes Dallas Willard. “Most of us as individuals, and world society as a whole, live at high-speed, and often with no clue to whether we are flying upside down or right-side up.” Lives get smashed and ruined when we ignore God’s authority and the guidance of his Word. We wreck our health, we wreck our family, we wreck our culture, we wreck our dignity, we wreck one thing after another, and if we never learn which way is up, we will crash into hell forever. We need to know what’s up and what’s down. When we desire and believe God’s rule and authority, we can fly right-side up.

### **Pure Pleasure**

Living under God’s authority is the way of pure pleasure: it’s pure and clean, and at the same time pleasurable and delightful. Psalm 119 says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word... I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (v. 9, 11). Sin might bring some pleasure, but it’s never pure pleasure. It always leaves a bad aftertaste, and it makes you sick.

Trust and obedience bring pure pleasure. Psalm 119 says, “I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches... I delight in your decrees... Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (v. 14,16,35,97,103).

A married couple told me how both of them had grown up without the guidance of God’s Word. Their families taught them nothing about sexual purity. The husband said that when he was young, his only guidance in this area came when family members would ask whether he had scored with any girl the previous weekend. The wife said that when she was young, her only guidance came when her mother said to her, “Let me know when you want to start having sex with boys so that we can get birth control.” So before this woman and man met each other, they had various sexual partners. After they met, they lived together for a few years before they got married. They didn’t live by God’s law to abstain from sex until marriage.

Now they have become Christians. They study the Bible. They see how their previous behavior deprived them of much joy. They don’t sit around complaining, however. Now that they know God and his Word, they find the Lord’s ways to be refreshing and exciting. They are staying faithful to each other, and they are guiding their children in a very different way than they grew up with. They want their children to save themselves for marriage and enjoy pure pleasure.

God’s authority guides not only our sexuality but our use of money, the way we set goals, the way we talk, the way we do our work, the way we think and theorize, the way we forgive offenses against us, the way we see every part of life as under God and live each moment for his glory. This helps us to enjoy the goodness of God’s world without leaving a bad aftertaste.

When you don't love or obey God, the universe can seem cold and hostile. But when you live under God's authority, God is near you and his love goes with you wherever you go. Psalm 119 says, "May your unfailing love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise... The earth is filled with your love, O Lord; teach me your decrees... May your unfailing love be my comfort" (v. 41, 64, 76).

Pure pleasure is tasting God's love everywhere you go and in everything you do. This doesn't happen to everyone, and it doesn't happen automatically. It happens only when you love and desire Jesus, when you live under his authority and obey his teaching. Does it sound legalistic to connect God's law with the experience of his love? Well, Psalm 119 repeatedly connects law and love, and Jesus himself connects love and obedience. One of Jesus' disciples asked him, "Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?" Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching" (John 14:22-24). "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:9-11). God's authority is not legalism. It is pure pleasure and perfect freedom.

### **Perfect Freedom**

Psalm 119 says, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (v. 32). "I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts" (v. 45). God's Word doesn't ruin freedom; it sets us free! Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

Satan says you're not free unless you can go where God tells you not to go. But what would you think if someone told you that you're not really free until you can live in a prison? Suppose you come near a prison area. You see walls and barbed wire, and you see signs warning you that this is a prison area and that you must not come any closer. Would you say, "I want to be free, and I can't be free unless I can go absolutely anywhere in the world. I can't be free unless I'm free to go inside that prison compound and live inside a cell." God's kind of freedom puts you outside prison walls to enjoy fresh air and green pastures. Satan's kind of freedom takes you away from clean air and open fields and gives you the "freedom" to breathe foul air in a dungeon of sin and bondage.

Jesus says, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). Some nonbelievers call themselves "free thinkers," but they are often trapped in a dungeon of their own silliness, cut off from the fresh air of God's truth. Those who talk big about free love are locked in a dungeon of their own hormones and urges. Those who talk about freedom to use alcohol and drugs without any limits are locked in a dungeon of their own addictions. Some who boast of "free enterprise" are in a dungeon of buying and selling, working and shopping, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The word *free* is easy to say, but real freedom comes only with God's authority and empowerment.

Scripture speaks of "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25). God calls us to freedom. This is not the kind of freedom where you fly upside down and crash just when you think you're heading upward. It's not the kind of freedom where you break into a prison of sin and lock yourself into a cell of addictive, compulsive behavior. No, the Bible speaks of "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). Many people who don't want the God

of the Bible are afraid that he would stifle their freedom. They don't realize that they are already imprisoned and enslaved by Satan and that Jesus holds the key to their freedom. Scripture says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17).

### **Superior Smarts**

Another huge benefit of living under God's authority is that you are learning from the smartest teacher in the world. A mentor like that gives you superior smarts. Psalm 119 says, "Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors" (v. 24). "Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts... you yourself have taught me... I gain understanding from your precepts" (v. 98-104).

The Bible teaches you to think like Jesus. No matter how smart your enemies are, Jesus is smarter. No matter how smart your teachers are, Jesus is smarter. No matter how wise and experienced some aged sage might be, Jesus is wiser and more experienced, and he's been around longer—forever, in fact. That's why Psalm 119 can say that the Lord's teaching makes you wiser than enemies, wiser than teachers, wiser than elders. The Bible says that in Jesus "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). Philosophy professor and author Dallas Willard comments,

Our commitment to Jesus can stand on no other foundation than a recognition that he is the one who knows the truth about our lives and our universe... Jesus knew how to transform the molecular structure of water to make it wine... He knew how to transform the tissues of the human body from sickness to health and from death to life. He knew how to suspend gravity, interrupt weather patterns, and eliminate unfruitful trees without saw or ax. He only needed a word. Surely he must be amused at what Nobel prizes are awarded for today.

In the ethical domain he brought an understanding of life that has influenced world thought more than any other... All these things show Jesus' cognitive and practical mastery of every phase of reality: physical, moral, and spiritual...

He is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history (Rev. 1:5) while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it (John 14:2). He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life.

If you want to be as smart as possible, you can't afford to ignore Jesus. Trust him to mentor you.

### **Desiring God**

Psalm 119 says many other things about the blessings of honoring God's authority and obeying his Word. Do you want your small, fragile life to connect with something big and permanent? Psalm 119 says, "Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" (v. 89). "All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal" (v. 160). Human theories come and go. Human ideas about morality change with the wind. But God's truth never changes, and his laws are eternal.

One huge reason for our authority problem, for not wanting God and not liking his authority, is the fear that we don't measure up. That fear is well-founded. You don't measure up. I don't measure up. Not even the writer of Psalm 119, who loved God's authority and his law so

much, measured up. The very last thing he says in Psalm 119 is this: “I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands” (v. 176). He loves God, but he sometimes wanders from him. He breaks God’s law, but he can’t forget God’s commands. So even when he’s not sure how to seek God, he asks God to seek him and bring him back.

That’s exactly what Jesus does. Jesus is the good shepherd. He seeks lost sheep and even lays down his life for his sheep. If you long to live under God’s authority but admit that you often sin, the gospel declares that “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:9). God uses his authority not just to command or direct but to forgive and rescue and transform.

If you listen to God’s Word and want him, his authority, and his blessings, then believe what you want. We talked earlier about people who want a world without the God of the Bible and who believe what they want. It’s foolish to believe what you want if what you want is fantasy unconnected with reality. But God is the ultimate reality. If you want him, then by all means believe what you want. If you want pure pleasure, believe what you want. If you want perfect freedom, believe what you want. If you want superior smarts, believe what you want. In wanting these things, what you really want is to know God and live under his authority. So believe what you want. Believe in God as the one who can answer the questions of your mind and satisfy the desires of your heart. If you want God to have mercy, believe what you want. If you want forgiveness, believe what you want. If you want to live forever under God’s authority and love, believe what you want. If you want what God wants, then believe what God says. And as you believe, you will receive.