

Faith: rash or rational

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Preacher: Andy Ritson

[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon everyone, and welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime service. If it's your first time here, then especially one welcome to you. It's really lovely to have you with us.

Just a little reminder about what we've been doing over the last few weeks. We've been doing things slightly differently. Normally on a Wednesday lunchtime, we would open up a Bible passage and unpack what God is saying in that passage to us.

That will continue next week, but we'll go back to doing that style things next week. But over the last few weeks, we've been trying to address some of the big issues that are inevitably flagged up around this time of the year at Christmas.

So two weeks ago, we looked at death, that people feel so acutely at Christmas, and looked at what the Bible has to say about death. Last week, we looked at human value, and why we suddenly start valuing people at Christmas, and spending time with people we don't tend to like very much.

And this week, we're going to be looking at the idea of a supernatural. People show great interest in the supernatural at Christmas, don't they? People start going to church for the first time.

[1 : 11] But the question is, is that rational at all? Is that sensible? So we'll be looking at that today. But before we do that, let me pray for us. Father God, we do thank you that we can spend time together today in your word.

We thank you that you've given us brains to think. And we thank you that you want us to think rightly about the world we live in, about ourselves, and about your word.

And we pray you'd help us to do that today. We do pray, Father, for those amongst us who might be here visiting, wouldn't call themselves Christians.

We pray that this would be a helpful time to them, that it would help them in their journey of discovery, to find out what is true. And for those of us that would call ourselves Christians, we pray that through looking at these issues like we have over the last week, they would help us to be better equipped to have good conversations with our friends and families, find point of contact with them, and that we might be able to share the gospel with them with more ease.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. You can't help but notice at Christmastime that there's a heightened interest in faith.

[2 : 33] This year at the Tron, we saw hordes of visitors flood through our doors to our Christmas services as people wrestled with the idea that there might be more to this world and indeed to this life than what we can simply see with our eyes.

My family used to do the same thing every year. My family aren't Christians. But we would go to a midnight mass service every Christmas Eve to drink in that sense of a transcendence and to wonder whether there might actually be more to life than this, that there might actually be a supernatural God out there who wants to relate to us.

But it doesn't take long for those thoughts then to evaporate very quickly the next day. And we found ourselves laughing to ourselves for thinking that the supernatural being might indeed have entered our world 2,000 years ago in the form of a baby.

I would say things to myself like, what an absurd and fanciful idea. But there's no place for that kind of thinking in our modern rational day. For that is what I'd always been told.

I'm sure that we've all been told at some time that faith in a supernatural God is an outdated delusion that is living on borrowed time.

[3 : 48] It was fine for our primitive ancestors back then to believe in such nonsense, but it has no place in our modern rational society. The Greeks might have thought that the thunder and lightning they heard was due to the gods quarreling up Mount Olympus, those poor pitiful souls.

But we know far better now. And people often speak of the Bible authors in a similar vein. We think that the disciples just simply deluded themselves that Jesus rose from the dead.

They were just so desperate to believe anything that they would believe absolutely anything. But we, on the other hand today, well, we are far more advanced than them back then.

Science is the great triumph of our age that has finally put the nail in faith's coffin. Or so the story goes. I'm sure we've all heard that argument.

And some of us may well be quite convinced by that argument. And if that is you today, then we are so glad that you're with us and hope that you feel welcome here. But what I want to do today is to challenge some of those assumptions that you might have.

[4 : 58] And if you are a Christian here today, hopefully give you more confidence in the faith that you hold to. There are some issues, aren't there, with that idea that faith in the supernatural is only something for our primitive ancestors.

Firstly, it's just really arrogant. It's absolute hubris to look back at past generations with contempt and call them primitive and unthinking.

Did you know that in 585 BC, Thales, who is a Greek scientist, correctly determined the length of a year to be 365 days. And also predicted that there would be a solar eclipse in that exact same year. And one of his contemporaries, Antaximander, well, he invented a waterproof clock 2,500 years ago. Now, can I ask, how many of us here today could have done that?

I certainly couldn't have. Our ancestors were not primitive Neanderthals who were utterly gullible.

They were intelligent people, dedicated to science, just like scientists are today.

[6 : 12] So let's not make them out to be impressionable fools, ready to believe anything that was thrown at them. And secondly, focusing on the people we read about in the pages of the Bible, even though they had a worldview that believed in the supernatural, and believed that God could indeed intervene in the world, miracles were still largely met with disbelief in the Bible, weren't they?

People didn't swallow the miraculous explanation rashly. Joseph needed to be visited by an angel, the angel Gabriel, personally, because he did not believe that Mary could have possibly conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And the disciples, how did they react when Mary returned from the tomb, telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead? They disbelieved. They thought she was out of her mind. And Thomas, well, he even had to put his fingers in Jesus' hands and the wound in his side to truly believe that it really was him risen from the dead.

The Bible authors were not gullible men, desperate to believe the miraculous. They scrutinized everything and needed to be convinced like any modern-day person.

So we need to be careful not to caricature past generations, especially the people we meet in the pages of the Bible, in order to discredit their testimony and discredit their faith, and say it's irrational nonsense.

[7 : 42] But we also need to be careful not to caricature of a debate between science and Christianity, as some do today by setting them against one another. Many atheist scientists who grab the headlines in the media and influence public thinking today would have us believe that you can't be scientific and thus truly rational and a Christian at the same time.

In their minds, they are polar opposites. But that's actually quite deliberate and deceptive behavior on their behalf that flies in the face of evidence.

Let me show you why. Two very important surveys were conducted in the 20th century, one in the year 1916 and one in the year 1996.

They were 80 years apart, but the survey asked the same question to the scientific community. And that question was this, do you believe in a God who is active and answers prayer?

So not exclusively do you believe in a Christian God, but do you believe in an active God who answers prayer? And I think you'll find the results quite surprising. Both in 1916 and 1996, the proportion who answered yes to that question was around 40% of scientists.

[9 : 08] And it had barely changed at all in those 80 years, despite the fact that science had advanced so drastically that there'd been advances in nuclear physics, that man had put a man on the moon.

It hadn't led to scientists with faith giving up on their faith. For science and faith are not at war with one another, though some atheists would like us to think so.

And I think that's shown by the fact that there are so many Christian scientists who are at the top of their respective fields. Francis Collins, he's in charge of a human genome project, and he's a Christian.

Bill Phillips won a Nobel Prize just a few years ago in physics, also a Christian. John Houghton, chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, also a Christian.

Becoming a scientist does not lead to you becoming irreligious or having to lose your faith. And having faith is not the opposite of being rational. It's a false idea that science and Christianity are at loggerheads with one another.

[10:24] But you might be forgiven in thinking that, well, okay, you can be a Christian and a scientist, but surely an atheist scientist will be far less biased than a Christian scientist.

But surely Christians come to their scientific work with all sorts of baggage, desperate to confirm these beliefs that they hold to. Well, the truth is that every person has preconceived ideas and has a bias, no matter what they believe.

There is no such thing as an unbiased scientific observer. Everyone, whether atheist or Christian or any of a religion, will naturally try and force the evidence to support what they already think.

That is just how human beings work. We try and justify everything that we believe. So atheist scientists can pull the other one if they think that they are the best suited to do science.

That is just arrogance and really lacking in self-awareness. They're just as biased as anybody else. They have just as much of an agenda as anybody else.

[11:31] But perhaps even, they're more dangerous than the Christian scientist because they don't recognize that they have that bias. So science and Christianity are not at war with one another.

And you can be a good scientist and a Christian at the same time. And there are many examples of that. However, there is an area of conflict when it comes to the question of what the limits to science are and how much science can explain.

Where Christian scientists and atheist scientists tend to differ is on how much weight to place on modern science. In recent years, some high-profile atheist scientists have put forward that scientific method is the only means by which we can arrive at truth and know that anything is indeed true. Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist scientist, said this, whatever knowledge is attainable must be attained by scientific methods only.

And what science cannot discover, well, man cannot know. In other words, we can know nothing unless it has been derived through the scientific process.

[12:50] We must be able to put things in a test tube and analyze it to see if it's true. It must be observable by scientific experiment. And that is the only means of arriving at truth.

Well, the problem with Bertrand Russell's statement is that it's not a scientific statement in the slightest. It's a philosophical one. How does he know that the only means of arriving at truth is through scientific methods?

You can't test that scientifically, can you? No, it's a self-refuting statement. He's making an argument based on something that he completely undermines in his argument.

It's nonsense. But despite this glaringly obvious fault in what he's saying, many atheists still follow this thinking today that science can explain absolutely every aspect of our existence and one day indeed will.

And as much as I love science and think that it's great, it just cannot carry that burden on its back. I love that science has helped advance healthcare, brought about cures for diseases like smallpox and many others, flung mankind into space, and given me one of my simple daily pleasures, a nice warm shower in the morning.

[14:16] Science can do many great things, but not everything. The scientific method is fantastic answering those how and what questions that we have.

What is this thing made up of? How does this thing work? But it's terrible at answering the why questions. Like, why did the universe come into existence?

And I don't think it should have to answer those questions, for that is out with its remit. That is the remit of philosophy, not science.

And philosophers are far better equipped to answer those why questions than scientists are. But some atheist scientists insist otherwise.

Listen to what Stephen Hawking says. The question, where did all this come from? Did the universe need a creator? Traditionally, these are questions for philosophy.

[15:14] But philosophy is dead. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge. At the heart of this idea that science can explain absolutely everything is supreme arrogance.

It tramples over the duty of other better equipped departments like philosophy and history. And it's absurd to think that the only way we can know anything is by testing things with scientific methods. Some things just cannot be deduced that way. For example, how do you know what truly happened in history if you can't turn back the clock yourself, travel back in time and observe it for yourself with your own eyes?

How do you analyze the start of the universe in a laboratory? how do you deduce that a picture or a painting is beautiful using science?

You just cannot do that. And therefore, you cannot even work out answers to questions like, why did the universe come into being? You can analyze the universe and how it is here and now and work out what it's made up of and perhaps even work out how it came into being.

[16:28] But you can't turn back the watch to watch it all over again and use scientific method to do so. You're just simply asking far too much of science.

To illustrate this in more everyday terms, last week, I made a cake for my wife. I could ask a number of scientists to tell me about that cake and a nutritionist could perhaps tell me how many calories are in the cake and no doubt put me off eating it.

The biochemists, well, they could tell me the makeup of every protein, fat and starch that was in the cake. And the physicists and the mathematicians, the really intelligent ones, they could even explain the cake to me in terms of fundamental particles and how they relate to one another.

But none of the scientists could answer one simple question. And that is, why on earth did I make that cake? Now that isn't to insult their professions.

They can do some mind-baffling things with their brains. They're tremendous at answering the what and how questions. But their disciplines just cannot stretch that far to answer the why question.

[17:46] And to say as Bertrand Russell did that what science cannot discover man simply cannot know just blatantly isn't true. All you'd have to do is ask me and I could have told you why I made that cake.

For the record I made it because it was a birthday just so you carry on tuning in and don't get distracted by that. You can't deduce that through scientific analysis but that information is knowable by other means.

Simply put there are other ways of arriving at truth apart from through science and those methods can be just as legitimate. But you know what there's an even more fatal problem with the thinking of many atheist scientists than trying to make science do more than it's capable of.

And that problem is that although they think that they are rational thinkers who can solve the mysteries of the universe with enormous scientific brains they might not be able to trust their thinking at all.

for there's a problem in how they think about their own brains. Most atheist scientists think that our brains are purely there to drive our survival instinct.

[19:03] The brain is just neuronal signaling, chemical reactions whose sole purpose is to keep us alive and help us to reproduce. And if that's the case and it raises a question doesn't it how can we even trust what our brains are telling us?

If they're just concerned with keeping us alive then how can we assume that they're concerned with telling us what is true? They could be telling us any sorts of irrational things, any kind of nonsense if it keeps us alive.

If you follow this thinking through then seemingly the most intelligent of atheist scientists are putting trust in their own untrustworthy brains.

And that doesn't sound like a very rational thing to do to me. In fact it sounds very much like blind faith. The very thing that these atheist scientists would accuse Christians of doing and having.

So let's move on then and look at what the Bible has to say shall we? Could faith be more rational and sensible than atheists would lead us to think?

[20:19] Does the Bible say that there's a way of knowing what is true? Because putting all our trust in scientific method seems to leave us in a pretty dire situation where we can't trust that anything is true at all.

Well at first glance it looks quite promising what the Bible has to say. The Bible says that we were created perfect and that our thinking patterns were completely rational and trustworthy because we were created in the image of a rational and trustworthy God.

You might be thinking so far so good but there's a problem and the problem is that we didn't stay that way forever did we? When we rebelled against God and dishonoured him there were terrible consequences.

God cursed humanity and we became futile in our thinking. No longer were our thinking patterns utterly trustworthy. No longer did we instinctively know what was true but rather we became very confused.

And even worse than that the problem isn't just that we don't think well. The problem is compounded by the fact that when we actually do come across truth that God has made visible in the world we suppress it at all costs.

[21 : 37] Romans 1 verse 18 says this onwards. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them for his invisible attributes namely his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that he has made.

So they are without excuse. It's not just that our minds can't process properly anymore and arrive at truth anymore but it's that we naturally suppress the truth when we come across it in our world.

God has made himself knowable in his creation. That's what Romans tells us. But we naturally choose to suppress that truth that he's disclosed about himself.

And the reason we do that is because we don't want to live with the implications of that truth. That there is a supernatural creative God out there who made the universe and everything in it and knows best how it's to work and that we as his creatures have a responsibility to honour him and to live rightly in light of that.

[22 : 56] So it seems then the Bible says that we can't make rational choices either or arrive at truth on our own. The Bible it seems leaves us mistrusting our brains just as much as those who put their trust in science and the capacity of the human mind.

But there's something wonderfully different about Christianity and the Bible's approach. We may not be able to arrive at truth on our own by trusting in our own mental faculties but our almighty God can reveal truth to us.

We can't work out the answers to the big questions of life by utilising our own unreliable thinking but God can make truth known to us.

And the wonderful thing about the Christian God is that he has indeed made himself known. He's a God who speaks and communicates with us. He spoke in the beginning when he created absolutely everything and even after mankind rebelled against him and wanted nothing to do with him he continued to speak to them.

Hebrews 1 verses 1 to 3 says this long ago at many times and many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

[24 : 16] But in these last days he's spoken to us by his son whom he appointed the heir of all things through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

He has spoken by the prophets throughout history and spoken definitively to the human race through his son the Lord Jesus Christ who came into the world entered our human history and has shown us truth definitively.

He has shown us that there is an almighty creator God who has made us and is invested in this world that we live in. Now we still have the problem that we can suppress that truth that God has revealed both in creation and in history which has been recorded in the Bible.

But the wonderful thing is that God intervenes and accommodates for our truth suppression tendencies. He works a miracle in us for that is what is needed that we might see him rightly and what he reveals about the universe and ourselves.

ourselves. We still have twisted and distorted minds and we therefore can't know him perfectly but we can know him truly.

[25 : 37] Not through trusting our own mental strength, not by testing everything by scientific methods, but by having our creator reveal himself to us in a way that we can understand, that

overrides our weakness and inability.

And like we said when we looked at the cake analogy, that is a legitimate way of arriving at truth for the creator to reveal that truth to us. It's entirely sensible and rational to allow the creator, the only truly rational being, the one who knows absolutely everything about everything, to reveal truth to us about himself, about us and our world, rather than stumbling around in the dark, trying to discover truth with minds that might be treacherous and unreliable, which might have no interest in truth at all.

So to conclude, at the start we asked if having faith in the supernatural was sensible. Is faith in God rash, just hopeful thinking, or is it indeed rational?

Well hopefully we've seen that contrary to influential atheist scientists, rationality and faith don't have to be mutually exclusive. And in fact, if you follow their conclusions, then you can't say that any decision is indeed rational, for the brain isn't concerned with truth at all in atheism, but purely in keeping you alive.

So an atheist is in no position to judge whether a Christian's faith is rational or not, but they can't even be sure that what they believe is rational or not.

[27 : 19] The Bible, on the other hand, well tells us that we can't know anything perfectly because of our corrupted minds, but that we can know things truly.

Not through trusting our human thinking, but rather by truth being revealed to us by a kind God who can do a miraculous work in us to bring us saving faith so that we no longer suppress that truth that we come across in the world all the time.

We can't arrive at truth on our own. That's where the Bible and the end result of atheist thinking do actually agree. Only God's kind gift of faith to us will help us see rightly and to know the truth truly.

Faith, I think, proves to be rational indeed, far more sensible than atheism. Let me pray for us.

Father God, we are so thankful for you.

Left to our own devices, we would not be able to come to any truth. Our minds are corrupt. Our hearts rebel against you and want to suppress the truth that you disclose about yourself in this world at every opportunity.

[28 : 48] But thank you that you're a God who made yourself known to us. Thank you that you care enough about us that you would not leave us in the dark. Thank you that you would speak to us through your prophets, send the Lord Jesus Christ into the world that we might know truth, that we might know that you are there, that we might know that you're the one governing the universe and that our lives have real meaning.

Thank you that you do that despite all our rebellion against you. And we give you great praise in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.