

My friends, I will be taking part in a debate this month. It is titled *Good Without God?*, and I will be debating a minister and an atheist. I would be very appreciative if you would attend—I think you'll enjoy it, and I would welcome the moral support (no pun intended). I expect that the minister and I will have very little on which to disagree in this debate. Obviously, I do not have the same expectations regarding Dan Barker, the fundamentalist Christian turned atheist.

The subject of the debate is not the existence of God, but clearly that will underly the arguments put forth by both the religious and the atheist members of the panel. Tonight, I would like to share with you one difference between atheists and believers. Those of us who believe in God have one problem, one challenge to which we must respond. It is the question of unjust suffering: if there is a God and God is good, why is there unjust suffering in the world. My previous talk regarding the State Fair tragedy, A

*Freakish Act of God?*, contains a piece of my answer, but I will approach it tonight from a different angle.

Tonight, I will share with you the initial thinking that led me to the arguments I presented in *A Freakish Act of God?*. It was not until I became a parent that I began to think along these lines.

When our children are little, they think that we, their parents, can do anything. They think so because we can do so many things that they are incapable of doing. We can reach the jar on the top shelf and get the lid off the jar. We can do lots of things easily that are very difficult or impossible for little hands and fingers. We can even fix their toys when they break. The children see all that we can do but they cannot, and they simply assume we can do anything.

Then someday a toy breaks that we cannot fix. The image of the omnipotent parent is gone for good. However, we hope that our children will conclude that even though we have limitations, we are still worthy of their love.

We have to do the same with God.

Because God is powerful enough to create the universe, we make the same leap our children make. We assume that just as God made the world, He controls everything in it. But we begin to notice that suffering is not confined to the world's evil inhabitants. They sometimes suffer, but they sometimes prosper as well. Good people sometimes suffer unspeakable and underserved pain. Some of us are content to believe that God has His reasons for this that we cannot understand. Others of us modify our belief system. We think that even the God that created the universe does not control everything in the universe. If I believed otherwise, I would not find God worthy of love,

respect, or worship. Once I acknowledge that life is frequently unfair in spite of God, not because of God, I have solved my problem.

Now for the atheist. As a believer I have to explain unjust suffering, but the atheist has to explain everything else. Everything.

The very existence of the universe, the level of order built into the universe that is so complex only highly trained scientists can fully understand what we've discovered so far (nothing suggests that there is not far more yet to be discovered), the idea that intelligence comes from non-intelligence, how humanity went from cave dwelling to Mozart to Einstein—this barely scratches the surface of all the atheist must account for. And the poor atheist has only one explanation to put forth: it all just happened by itself.

If that same atheist was walking a beach and found seashells spelling out the word “Hello,” he would never believe it just happened to wash up on the shore that way. He would believe that someone came along and arranged the shells. If he comes home to find a cookie jar smashed to pieces on the floor and a child with cookie crumbs and chocolate stains on his clothes, he would not assume that it all happened on its own. But when it comes to the existence of the universe, that, he must insist, happened all by itself.

Here comes a major confession on my part: the atheist has far more faith than I do. Our faiths are not identical. I believe in God; the atheist believes in chance and coincidence. But it is not at all difficult for me to believe that there was a creator of the universe. I cannot imagine how much faith in chance it requires to believe that everything in the universe, including the universe itself, came about by sheer chance.

Another confession: I have had crises of faith in my life. In the worst personal crisis of faith that I can remember, I doubted not the existence of God, but that God's existence meant anything. In short, I freely admit that my religious life has and will again include struggling with issues of faith.

On the other hand, I have yet to meet an atheist who struggles with doubts about his atheism. By definition, an atheist has no doubt but that there is no God at all. If he were a person who struggles with doubts about God, he would either define himself as a doubting believer or an agnostic. But atheists, by definition, are certain there is no God. Therefore, atheism is one of the most uncritical belief systems in existence. When my opponent at the debate, Dan Barker, left fundamentalist Christianity for atheism, he merely exchanged one form of fundamentalism for an opposite form of fundamentalism. Because I am not a

fundamentalist, I anticipate he will accuse me of being selective about the parts of religion I accept or reject. I'm all set for that accusation, and if you promise not to reveal it before the debate, I'll tell you how I'll respond. He'll say I'm selective about the parts of religion I believe in, and I will say, "So what?"

I'll conclude tonight with a question to take home with you. Which problem is your problem? Do you have to account for unjust suffering, or do you have to account for everything else in the universe? If you must account for unjust suffering, does my response work for you? If not, I would be greatly interested in your response—not to try to poke holes in it, I promise you—just to understand the thinking of other believers. And if your problem is the problem of the atheist, I am especially curious about how you believe intelligence came from non-intelligence, and how you decide what is moral and what is not. Again, not to criticize your thinking, but to understand it.

That's it for tonight, my friends. Please come out on September 14 at the Zionsville United Methodist Church. I know it is not around the corner—Evan and I rehearse there with the Zionsville Concert Band. Come anyway. Your presence will be greatly appreciated. No matter what, I can make a statement about the debate that my atheist opponent can never make. I don't think it's true of political elections or sports contests, but in this debate, I really believe that God is on my side!