

Opened Minds

Atheists, Agnostics, and Apostles

May 28, 2023

Today we're *opening* our *minds* – and *appreciating Noah's* 4-part *testimony* of *how* the Lord *led* him from "the *dark side of the force*" to the *light*. But first: **Do you have an open mind?**



And *what's* that even *mean*? I really enjoy Noah's *perspective*, cuz he makes *atheists* far *less intimidating* and *un-relatable* and far *more lovable* and *pitiable*, by allowing us to see **how much they dislike so much of what they have to believe** (like a *life devoid of purpose, significance, and hope* in the *face of death*), **in order to not believe in God, ... in order to be their own god**. Which is a *trade* so often *made* down here. Because it's **the same ol' garden variety sin of rebellion** that we've all shared since, well, the *garden*.

When I told Noah what I was speaking on, he told me a story about the two of us that I don't remember. In one of our *early interactions*, he came to me with some *frustrating*, seemingly *contradictory* Scripture – and *apparently rather* than try to *dispel* his *concern*, or *sell* him a *half-baked answer* or a *strained rationalization*, or a *well-reasoned apologetic*, or *fall back* on *blind faith*, I said: "You think *that's* bad!?" And then proceeded to *pile on* three additional *problems* that were *worse* than *his*. And he said **he was attracted to the honesty of hitting the problem head on with the excitement that comes from the confidence that there absolutely is an answer to be had**. And **by simply identifying the challenge, we were well on the way to solving it!** And since then, he said he's found *troves* of answers he wouldn't have even thought to dig for. Cuz *this* is a *place* where **we're always seeking to enrich our grasp of God and His Word**. Because, 1) "For *now* we see in a *mirror, dimly*" and "*know in part*" (as we men are reminded in the *restroom mirror*); and, 2) There's a perfect understanding *yet* to *come* to those *seeking*, which is *when* "that *which* is in *part* will be *done away*"; (1 Cor 13:10-12) and 3) That's why:

We are not *peddlers* of God's Word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of *sincerity*, as persons *sent* from *God* and *standing* in His *presence*. – 2 Corinthians 2:17 NRS

And **He demands perfect honesty via humility**. It's funny, but it's one of the *few* ways we can be *perfect* in *His* eyes – by **admitting our imperfect and incomplete understanding**. Rather than **dogmatically defending debated doctrines as though we now know perfectly**, and *not* in *part*.

Just look how *Jesus'* testimony is broken into *parts* and *pieces* and *scattered* among the *four* Gospels and *several* *epistles*. There's been about *200* *failed, yet published, attempts* to *perfectly harmonize* their *parts*. And with all this talk on *atheism*, I took a *nostalgic* look back on our old pal Dan Barker, the polar opposite of *Noah*: a *pastor* turned *atheist* who, in his *Empty Tomb Challenge*, defied anyone to *perfectly synchronize* the various *parts* of the *resurrection*.

And yet, quoting Thomas Pain, *Dan writes*: “I lay it down as a position which *cannot be [refuted or challenged]* ... *first*, that **the agreement of all the parts of a story does not prove that story to be true**, because the *parts* may *agree* and the *whole* may be *false*; *secondly*, that **the disagreement of the parts of a story proves the whole cannot be true.**” Funny, how that works in favor of Dan’s agenda: **contradiction proves Scripture false**; and **perfect harmony proves a conspiracy**. Dan don’t have an open mind. Because, like so *many* of us, *Dan* is a *cheater* – cheating *himself* and *others* into thinking he has an *open mind* while *rigging* an *unwinnable* challenge. Like so many, **Dan isn’t seeking truth, but subconsciously suppressing it.** *First* and *foremost* from *himself*. Like the men *Paul* describes:

Men who *suppress* the *truth* by their wickedness, since what *may* be *known* about God is *plain* to them, because God has *made* it *plain* to them ... so that men are without *excuse*. ... their *thinking* became *futile* and their *foolish hearts* were *darkened*. Although they *claimed* to be *wise*, they became *fools* – Romans 1:18-22 NIV



And you gotta *pity* a *fool*, as frustrating as they may be, because they’ve barred the door of their heart to even the *possibility* of a *truth outside of themselves*. Unlike an *agnostic* who’s open to the possibility of God, but leans on the *self-invalidating, circular-logic* of “I know that *nobody* can know anything”, *atheism* is an *emotionally charged philosophy*. **It’s an irrational expression of aggression against a nonexistent God.** It’s a type of *grand spiritual tantrum*. When someone tells me they’re an *atheist*, I like to say, “I don’t believe it.” And I ask them to draw a *circle*. I now present: **How to Turn an Honest Atheist Into an Open Agnostic.** 1) Ask them to draw a circle to represent *all* the knowledge and ultimate truth of every dimensional universe known and unknown. We’ll use a photo of galaxies as a background; the field of vision here being the equivalent to a dime at 75’. 2) Ask them to draw a circle inside that circle, to represent how much of it they currently possess. This much? This much? This much? 3) Point to the space outside of their own limited circle, and ask if there’s possibly room out there for a God they don’t yet *know* or *understand*. And if they say anything like yes or maybe, let ‘em know they’re an *agnostic*, not an *atheist*. And once an atheist admits they’re an agnostic, it’s a slippery slope to Christianity! But remember, **you’ll never argue anyone into faith.** All we can do is shine a light, poke some pinholes in *faulty, futile logic*, and hope the truth that gets in *grows*.

Archaeologists, anthropologists, and missionaries have never discovered a civilization of atheists. There’s a universal desire to worship ... *something*. And **know what else we all share? The violation of the conscience.** Atheists try to *avoid* it by eliminating *God*. But there’s a universal *moral compass*, and a universal *nature* to *deviate* from it – even among Jesus’ *closest companions* and *apostles*. In fact, the *day* Jesus *rose*, He *rebuked* nearly every *one* of ‘em!

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, **[after hearing all the accounts that Jesus did what He said He’d do]** with **the doors locked for fear of the Jews**, **[rather than opened and waiting expectantly for fear of the Lord]** Jesus came and stood among them **[in spite of their locked doors]** and said, “Peace be with you!” After He said this, He showed them His *hands* and *side*. **[Why?]** – John 20:19-20 NIV

[Cuz He *had to!* *Because*] When Jesus rose ... He appeared first to Mary Magdalene ... She went and told those who had been *with* Him ... When they heard that Jesus was *alive* and that *she* had *seen* Him, they did *not* believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them ... These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did *not* believe *them either*. Later [with *doors locked for fear of the Jews*] Jesus appeared to the Eleven *as they were eating*; He *rebuked* them for their *lack of faith* [eating *without Him*] and their *stubborn refusal to believe* those who had *seen* Him *after* He had *risen*. – Mark 16:9-14 NIV



You see, **the predisposition of the heart determines the openness of the mind.** Noah and I share a love for one the most *famous former atheists*: C.S. Lewis. Here are two little known *quotes* that I just love: **“Sometimes it would just be very convenient if Christianity were *not* true.”** and **“Now that I’m a Christian, I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable; but when I was an atheist, I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable.”** And when Noah *first* started *working* here, I told him about this *time* I wanted to know C.S. Lewis’ *view* on a *specific troubling Scripture*, but he never *wrote* about it.

And I prayed for wisdom. And a man approached *me* on Sunday morning and said his *aunt* had kept a personal *correspondence* with C.S. Lewis, and he thought I might like to see their *letters*. Which I did. And to my amazement, this guy’s *aunt* *asked* about *that* Scripture ... and C.S. Lewis *answered* my question! And I told Noah how I wanted to tell the guy how much it meant to me. I could remember our conversation, and his height, and his build, and his affability – but for the *life* of me, I couldn’t *picture* his *face*, and it was *killing* me. Know the *punchline*? It was *Noah*.

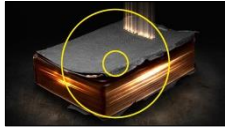
[Now] Jesus *himself* ... said to them, “*Peace* be with you.” [But instead of glorifying God and laughing with relief] They were *startled* and *frightened*, thinking they saw a *ghost*. [Cuz, like their locked room, they weren’t open to the Truth. So] He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at My *hands* and My *feet*. ... *Touch Me* and *see*” – Luke 24:36-39 NIV

How sad. But then, in their *defense*, this is *fairly unprecedented*. But in their *prosecution*, just three nights earlier, after the Last Supper, on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said:

“I *will not* leave you as orphans; I *will come* to you. Before long, the world will not see Me anymore, but *you will* see Me. ... All this I have spoken while still with you. ... My peace I give you. [Which is why He says, “Peace be with you” when He shows up in their midst] ... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. [Which is why He said, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?” Cuz just three nights earlier He confirmed that] You *heard* Me say, ‘I am going away and I *am coming back* to you.’ ... I have told you now [just three nights] before it happens, *so that* when it *does* happen you *will* believe.” – John 14:18-29 NIV

But, just *three* nights later, their *hearts*, like their *doors*, were *closed* to the *possibility* of a *truth outside* of themselves. **Dan demands truth on his terms.** So did *they*. Do you? **Dan’s only willing to go where the truth leads, as long as it leads to where he wants to go.** Are we any *different*? I *sure hope* so. I’m not *picking* on poor ol’ *Dan*; I **suspect we have more in common than not.**

He asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave Him a *piece* of broiled fish, and He *took* it and *ate* it in their *presence*. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then He opened their minds so they could *understand the Scriptures.*" – Luke 24:36-45 NIV



The Good News is: **Jesus ignores locked doors if there's a chance of reception inside.** So what's it mean to have an open mind? **It means to have an opened mind,** to all the truth *outside ourselves*, which is something *only Jesus* can do ... because, **He has a monopoly on truth.** Which is *found* in *His Word*. Which *we're* commanded to *store up* in *our heart*. Draw a circle to represent all the truth the Lord has tried to get into your *mind* and *heart* (through *His Word*, *His Spirit*, your *conscience*, and others). Now draw a circle inside it, to represent the *amount* of *truth* you've actually *received*. And by *received*, I mean *responded to* and *put into practice*. *This much? This much? This much?* Once a believer *admits* they're *need to receive*, it's a *slippery slope to maturity!* **We can't open our own minds to anything but futility, foolishness, and hopeless darkness.** **But, we can renew our minds with truth on God's terms,** by *opening our heart to following* it *wherever* it leads. So, **why did Jesus eat their leftover fish?** To show 'em He's not a *ghost? No.* That's why He had 'em *touch Him*. The significance isn't the *eating*, but the *servicing*. Cuz He'd *warned* 'em:

"It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, *he ... will have them* recline at the table and will *come and wait on them*. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready ... because the *Son of Man* will *come* at an hour when you do not expect *Him.*" – Luke 12:35-41 NIV

Jesus hadn't let the *gates of hell* or *death itself* stop Him from *keeping His Word* and *coming to serve!* **The only thing that stopped Him, was their closed hearts and minds.** And so, *when He came*, and they'd eaten *without Him; doors locked; backs turned;* and *debating and disputing* those who'd *seen Him*, and were *sent to prepare* 'em, He *looked over the leftovers* and ...

He asked *them*, "Do you have anything **[left]** here to eat?" They gave *Him* a *piece* of broiled fish, and **[instead of serving]** He *took it* and *ate it* in *their presence*. – Luke 24:36 NIV

Imagine the *awkward silence*. Welcome *back, Jesus*. *Got'a love us!* You can be a witness of everything Jesus has done; but **if your heart isn't unlocked and wide open, filled with His Word, and surrendered on His terms, you will cheat yourself out of being served by Jesus Himself.** But *finally*, on His *third appearance*, they were waiting and watching, at the Sea of Galilee, and:

Jesus said to *them*, "Come and have *breakfast.*" ... **[And]** Jesus *came, took* the *bread* and **[this time]** *gave it to them*, and did the *same* with the *fish*. **[But]** This was now the *third time* Jesus appeared to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. – John 21:12-14 NIV

Cuz, if *we won't* open our *heart*, *He can't* come and *serve ...* and open our *mind*. As He *himself* said:

"Everyone on the *side of truth* **[at least]** *listens to Me.*" – John 18:37 NIV