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## Favorite Things # 5 – Why I Believe – Faith is Reasonable – 10.25.9

Today I finish out this series of favorite things to preach on with this message on why I believe faith is reasonable. We could go many directions with this topic. We could talk about why it makes sense to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, or why the Bible is reliable. We could talk about the wrong-headed belief that science disproves faith, or we could look at the equally wrongheaded idea that it isn't possible for just one faith to be true. But instead of those things, we're going to talk about some signs that point to God. So if your own faith needs strengthening or if you just need some encouragement for talking to others about why you believe in God, listen up, follow along, and if you want to do more study, check out the [resources at the end](#).

I can't remember a time when atheism has had more outspoken voices. There's Phillip Pullman, author of *The Golden Compass*, Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, and Sam Harris, author of *Letter to a Christian Nation* – all sharp-witted, sharp-tongued atheists who write to convert people to their non-faith. At the same time, the number of Americans who say they have no religion is rising, according to [a report in USA Today last month](#) (which Kathy Young gave me) but many of these folks still believe in God, and the percentage of atheists in the US has remained at 7 or 8% for years. Atheism isn't growing, but the noise is getting louder. We should be ready.

And to be ready, we have to understand the difference between reason and ridicule. Often when faith is attacked, it isn't with carefully thought-out reasons against faith, but rather with ridicule. Writers like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, and entertainers like Bill Maher—these guys are intelligent and articulate and they send out a stream of powerful ridicule, mocking faith and people who have it, and it is convincing – IF you don't know the difference between reason and ridicule.

Christopher Hitchens, for example, wrote a book called *God is Not Great*, a deliberate counter to the Islamic phrase "Allāhu Akbar", which means "God is Great". A [recent NPR story](#) quotes Hitchens telling a Toronto crowd, "*I think religion should be treated with ridicule, hatred and contempt, and I claim that right*". The story goes on to say that Hitchens thinks religion is dangerous "*because it can prompt people to fly airplanes into buildings, and it promotes ignorance*", and he believes that if he were to tell religious people that he respects their position, he would be lying.

That same NPR story begins by telling about Blasphemy Day, a celebration last month where atheists around the world held events to curse God and mock religion, de-baptizing people with hair dryers, trading Bibles for pornography and displaying paintings that make fun of the crucifixion of Jesus.

If all of that makes you uneasy, maybe even stirs a little anger in you, that's what it is designed to do. Almost every example I just gave is ridicule, and it has a strong emotional impact. Ridicule is designed to make doubters laugh at religion and brush it off as ridiculous, and to make believers angry and perhaps make fools of themselves in response. But it is a very different thing than reason. Of all the examples I just gave, there is only one fact presented, and that is when Hitchens says that religion "can prompt people to fly airplanes into buildings". Even that one is

debatable, because we can't be sure whether the terrorists were motivated more by religion or someone's political agenda, but their brand of religion certainly played a part, so I'll credit that as a fact. Everything else is ridicule, mockery. It establishes nothing in terms of facts or proof, but it has an emotional impact. If you have a professor in college who is especially witty who tosses in an occasional snide remark about faith or well-known church scandals, that can shake your faith, even though it is nothing but ridicule, and even though the professor, in spite of his or her intelligence and learning, has no more insight into ultimate reality than you do. It shakes you at an emotional level, and therefore it is powerful.

As I thought about this, I realized with some shame that we Christians are also more adept at ridicule than reason. If our entire argument against atheism is to quote **Psalm 53:1**, "**The fool says in his heart 'There is no God'**", that's ridicule. I know that it's Scripture and that means it's true, but if that's all we've got, then all we've got is ridicule. And by and large when we label people, as liberals or bigots or tree-huggers or Nazis, we're stooping to ridicule. When it comes to something as important as our faith, we'd better have some reason on our side too.

So let's look at some signs pointing to the existence of God. They ARE signs, not proofs. A God who created our universe is by definition not a part of it, and therefore cannot be proven from within it, and in the end we do have to take a step of faith to accept Him. Nevertheless, there are meaningful signs that point to Him, and we should be able to talk about them.

The first sign: **The Universe Began**. That might sound a little basic, but there was a time when many believed that the universe was eternal. One of the things that made Darwin's idea of **life developing by accident** sound reasonable was that people believed that there was an infinite amount of time for billions of accidents to happen and for a string of them to turn into me and you. If there is infinite time available for an infinite number of accidents, then eventually everything that is possible will happen. If we're playing poker and I deal myself a royal flush ten times in a row, you might think I'm cheating. After all, the odds say that in a five-card hand, I'd have to deal 650,000 times to get even one royal flush. But I would tell you that it's mathematically possible for that to happen by accident since we live in an infinite universe. That would convince you, right?

But today, no scientist believes we live in an infinite universe. We know that the Bible teaches that **in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth**, so we Christians have always known that the universe began, but now science believes it too. The Big Bang Theory (not the TV show but the scientific theory) says that the universe is expanding outward from a single point, and that space and time began to exist with a big bang 15 billion years ago. [Stephen Hawking](#) and Robert Penrose wrote in 1996 that "**Almost everyone now believes that the universe, and time itself, had a beginning at the Big Bang**". (From: *The Nature of Time and Space* [Princeton University Press, c. 1996] p. 20, cited by Timothy Keller in *The Reason for God*.)

Now I understand that the Big Bang isn't Young-Earth Creationism, and it may not match your understanding of the Biblical account. But I ask you to see it as **a sign** of God's existence as well as a point of agreement between believers and people who don't yet believe. The universe began. Before, there was nothing, says the Big Bang (and BTW, we cannot imagine nothing; we can imagine empty space, but space is something, it's part of the universe, and before the universe began, there was nothing). Nothing...except God.

Now within this universe of ours, everything that happens has a cause. Water boils because heat is applied. Your bulletin insert falls to the ground because the gravitational pull of the earth attracts it. The weather turns cool because the earth revolves around the sun and the northern hemisphere is tilted away from the sun. You fall asleep in church because you stayed up too late last night, not because the preacher is dull.

In our universe, everything that happens has a cause, and there are no accidents. I don't mean from a religious perspective but from a physical one. When we say that something was an accident, we mean that we didn't intend for it to happen and we didn't foresee it. But that glass of milk you knocked over fell because of the force of your hand smashing against it as you reached for the potatoes, and it spread across the table and dripped onto the carpet because of gravity and its own viscosity. Everything that happens has a cause.

**Does it make sense to say that, when you trace all the causes back to the beginning, back to the moment everything began, that there you would also find a cause?** It makes sense to me. Now, we cannot look back before the beginning. Anything that existed before the beginning of our natural universe wouldn't be part of nature – it...or He...would be supernatural.

Now here is what the Bible says about how the universe began and how it is sustained:

**<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup>For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).**

Likewise, the praise song from **Revelation 4:11** - **<sup>11</sup>"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."**

To be sure, it takes faith to say that, just as everything within our universe has a cause, there is One before the beginning who caused the universe itself. But I think it takes a great deal more faith to say: There is NO cause, and in fact no one can say that for certain, no matter how certain they sound, and no matter how much ridicule with which they say it.

The next sign: **The Universe is Finely-Tuned for Life**. Since most of us aren't scientists, we have a hard time grasping how finely-tuned the universe is for life, and how little margin for error that there actually is. But it's too important to neglect, so let me quote two experts.

The first is [Francis Collins](#), a geneticist who was appointed by President Obama this summer as the director of the National Institutes of Health, and before that was the director of the Human Genome Project which produced the first working blueprint of the human genome. Collins is also a rather outspoken evangelical Christian and [an interview with Salon](#), here's what he said about the fine-tuning of the universe:

*"When you look from the perspective of a scientist at the universe, it looks as if it knew we were coming. There are 15 constants—the gravitational constant, various constants about the strong and weak nuclear force, etc.—that have precise values. If any one of those constants was off by even one part in a million, or in some cases, by one part in a million million, the universe could not have actually come to the point where we see it. Matter would not have been able to coalesce, there would have been no galaxy, stars, planets or people"* [cited in Keller, *The Reason for God*].

Stephen Hawking, the famous physicist and an agnostic, says the same thing: *"The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big Bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications"* (from an interview cited by Collins, *The Language of God*, p. 75) And: *"It would be very difficult to explain why the universe would have begun in just this way except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us"* (from Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, also cited by Collins).

It's difficult for me to get my head around this, because the universe as it is happens to be the only one I know. But these guys are saying that such a universe coming into being by accident is incredibly lucky, much more unlikely than ten or a hundred or a thousand straight royal flushes.

As I said earlier, scientists used to say that in a universe that has always existed, anything possible will eventually happen, even the tremendously unlikely creation of complex life by chance. Well no one believes in an eternally preexistent universe anymore, but now an increasingly popular

idea is that maybe there are trillions of universes out there, and if there are enough universes coming into being and being formed by chance, at least one of them will turn out like ours.

I first learned about this idea where I learned most of my science: On *Star Trek*. In the original series, the Enterprise crossed over into an alternate universe where they met their evil selves, and you could tell that Spock was evil because he had a beard! The idea they were exploring was that maybe there are infinite universes, and that means there is one where everything is EXACTLY the same as ours except that I'm wearing a pink shirt this morning... etc.... and so there are many that are finely tuned to sustain life and many that are not.

But of course, we can never know whether or not other universes exist, because we are tied to this one. All we can say is that, if such a finely tuned universe is so unlikely so as to be essentially impossible, well maybe we have to assume that there are infinite accidental universes, or maybe it's a sign pointing to One who fine-tuned it to prepare it for life.

I can't say that the Bible addresses the fine-tuning of the universe (maybe you can think of a place where it does) but it does teach of a God of order who created a universe exactly as he meant to. God asks Job, in poetic fashion: <sup>31</sup> **"Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? <sup>32</sup> Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? <sup>33</sup> Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth? (Job 38:31-33)**

Admittedly, it takes a step of faith to see our God standing outside this universe and fine-tuning it for life. But it takes much more faith, I think, to stake your life on an unlikely accident or an unknowable multiverse of infinite universes.

For our **third sign**, let's listen to a little music. (Play Beethoven track)

That's Beethoven, and I present his music to you as evidence for God. I don't know much about classical music, but I know some of the classical artists – Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky's, Boccephus. And I know that works of art, works of beauty seem to shout that there is order in the universe, that it all makes sense. And that's the third clue to the existence of God.

**There is such a thing as beauty.** The legendary composer and conductor [Leonard Bernstein](#) said: *"Beethoven...turned out pieces of breath-taking rightness. Rightness—that's the word! When you get the feeling that whatever note succeeds the last is the only possible note that can rightly happen at that instant, in that context, then chances are you're listening to Beethoven...(he) has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down"* (from Keller, *The Reason for God*).

Bernstein, who was not religious in any orthodox sense, seems to be saying that Beethoven didn't just write great music, but rather that he discovered perfection, that he tapped into the beauty and order created by God Himself.

Maybe you're not wired for music, but for you, beauty and meaning can be found in a great painting or sculpture, or in literature, or standing outside looking across a huge valley between some of the Smoky Mountains, or at night looking up at the starry sky. Maybe you've seen beauty and rightness and wonder in your children, or in the person who is the love of your life,

Well...I hate to disappoint you...but if you are a naturalist – that is, someone who thinks that everything got here by accident, with no design or order or intelligence behind it – then all of your beauty is an illusion. You are a random collision of atoms. That beauty you see in your spouse or your kids is simply the result of millions of years of natural selection that has motivated you to reproduce. That landscape you find so wonderful – well, that's just because your ancestors found that places that looked like that were desirable places to find food, and people that weren't attracted to such places starved to death. And as far as your attraction to music or paintings or the

stars, maybe back in the early days of our race artists and people who love art were considered better mates and so they reproduced and others didn't and we inherited this seemingly superfluous trait. So your music, your paintings and sculptures, your sense of wonder on a mountain trail or staring up at the night sky, even the wonder and love you feel for your children...you are drawn to these things because they helped your ancestors survive in one way or another, not because there is any real truth or purpose or beauty there.

And while we're at it, let's apply the same thing to faith. Richard Dawkins says that faith began with certain of our ancestors who believed that there were enemies or wild beasts hiding in the brush ahead when in fact there weren't, and being a little paranoid helped them stay alive. As these folks survived at higher rates than people who had to see it to believe it, they had kids and grandkids who developed a bit further and who wrote stories and myths and learned to impose order and meaning where there was no real order and meaning. Faith in God was born because it helped people survive, not because it was true.

[Patricia Churchland](#), a philosopher, puts it like this: *"The principle chore of [brains] is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive. Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing [the world] is advantageous so long as it...enhances the organism's chances for survival. Truth, whatever that is, takes the hindmost."* [from Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*].

Do you see what a corner this paints a naturalist into? You can't trust your senses, it says. If you see a divine order in the world, or hear divine beauty, you cannot believe your eyes and ears. Likewise, if you see evolutionary forces at work through random accidents and natural selection – you can't believe your eyes and ears! If faith seems like a fairy tale to you, you can't trust your senses. Your senses are there to tell you whatever they have to so that you will survive, not to give you any kind of true, objective picture of the world. And you can't believe that either!

It THAT'S true, we know NOTHING about our world. For all we know, we could be walking around like Rowdy Roddy Piper in the movie [They Live](#), surrounded by hideous alien creatures, just waiting for someone to invent the special sunglasses we need to see them!

Or, we can take seriously what we see: Beauty amid ugliness; order running deeper than chaos; design that rises above randomness; and love that endures over hate and selfishness and apathy; and see behind it all a divine artist, designer and loving Father.

I hardly need to say that the Bible takes a view exactly opposite of the naturalist. David cries out in **Psalm 19 - <sup>1</sup> The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. <sup>2</sup> Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. <sup>3</sup>There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.** In the **Song of Solomon**, the woman says to the man she loves:

**<sup>6</sup> Place me like a seal over your heart,  
like a seal on your arm;  
for love is as strong as death,  
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.  
It burns like blazing fire,  
like a mighty flame.**

**<sup>7</sup> Many waters cannot quench love;  
rivers cannot wash it away.  
If one were to give  
all the wealth of his house for love,  
it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Solomon 8:6-7)**

It's a step of faith to accept beauty as a sign pointing to God, to say that love matters and that God IS, in fact, love, but I think it's a much larger step to deny any purpose or person behind it.

So there you have it – three signs pointing to God. There are many more, and maybe you ought to dig into the [resources at the end](#). I now want to wrap up with a different kind of reason to believe – specifically, a reason to believe in Jesus Christ as the way to salvation.

There are many religions in the world, and some people say it is arrogant to claim that ours is the only true one. But the fact is that every other religion offers you salvation by climbing a ladder of moral perfection. Follow the pillars of Islam and be righteous, not an infidel. Obey the Law of Moses and be counted among the pure. Eliminate desire in yourself and rise up to a better incarnation until finally you join with the universe in nirvana.

But talk to any of the faithful practitioners of these religions, and they'll admit that they fall short, that the Law doesn't make them completely righteous, that they can have no confidence in their own salvation. Religion doesn't work.

Only in Jesus Christ does God give us righteousness as a gift. Only in Christ does God himself pay the price for sin. Only through Jesus Christ is salvation proclaimed as something anyone can have by humbly accepting it from God's hand. From what I have seen in myself and in everyone else, that's the only way it could work.

## Invitation

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Resources:

*The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* by Timothy Keller – 2008

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

[Christian Book Distributors](#)

Keller is a pastor to a church in New York City and an evangelist to skeptics. His book covers a wide range of reasons to believe and is highly enjoyable. I can't lend you mine since I bought it electronically.

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[Interview with Dr. William Lane Craig](#) at Watermark Community Church in Dallas. Dr. Craig is a well-regarded and thoughtful professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Religion in California. This is an excellent audio interview about signs pointing to God.

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[Reasonable Faith \(reasonablefaith.org\)](#). The apologetics site for Dr. William Lane Craig (see above). Contains a lot of very good material including responses to well-known atheists. **NOTE that much of the material requires a free registration.**

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*The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel – 2000

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

[Christian Book Distributors](#)

Strobel is a journalist and former atheist. In this book, he presents answers to common objections to faith, covering some of the same ground as Timothy Keller (see above). I prefer Keller's approach, but many folks have been challenged by Strobel and this book is available in the MHCC library (in the conference room). Strobel's *The Case For Christ* examines evidence for the resurrection.

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*The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* by Francis Collins - 2006

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

[Christian Book Distributors](#)

Collins, a geneticist, is the former director of the Human Genome Project, the recently appointed head of the National Institutes for Health and an evangelical Christian. This book presents signs pointing to God in our genetic code. **Note that Collins subscribes to evolution and doesn't subscribe to Young Earth Creationism or Intelligent Design.** If that makes him seem like a controversial recommendation, consider that this book might not be for you, but for someone in your life who needs to take some first steps toward faith. Collins owes his own conversion to the works of C. S. Lewis (also not a Young Earth Creationist) and Lee Strobel. I have a copy of Collins' book that I'll loan out.

[Here are a few of my thoughts on \*The Language For God\* at my \*Waiting For Sunday\* site.](#)

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*The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis – 1940

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

[Christian Book Distributors](#)

This classic work deals with evidence for God in light of human suffering, and skillfully lays out the idea that the fact that suffering offends us points to our divine nature (something I touched on in the first two sermons in the *Favorites* series). I have this one to loan.