

Living Like a Practical Atheist

How many true Christians believe in God? That may sound like a shocking question. Isn't it obvious that all saved people believe in God? How else could they be saved? It is true that every true born-again Christian believes in God – but all too often, in our everyday lives, it just does not seem like it.

For many a Christian, God is a concept, an idea that occurs to them on Sunday, but otherwise, for all intents and purposes, they may as well be atheists. When we live like God is not coming soon, when we make decisions without so much as a prayer, when we sin believing there are no consequences, when we relate to this world like it is our final home – we are practicing atheists.

Yes, in our hearts, there is a belief system, there is a belief that God exists, that Christ is His Son, that He died and rose again for our sins, that salvation is through Him alone – but when we live our lives like atheists, we demonstrate that these beliefs are not what are governing us at the time. See, we always behave our beliefs. No one acts contrary to what they think is true, at any given point in their life. And when we live like God is not – then that is what we believe at that moment.

What is the solution to being a practical atheist? How do I live in a way consistent with what I profess to believe? How do I take my belief system and make it practical? The answer is simple – exercise biblical faith. We see this in **Hebrews 11**. After giving a description of faith, the writer then gives us the operation of faith:

But without faith, it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

Notice, firstly, that the absence of this principle renders all else impossible. According to this Scripture, your Christian life cannot get off the ground without faith. The point of our lives – to glorify God – cannot be reached without faith being in operation. It is hard to define the Christian life in terms of a process with beginning and end points, but this much is true – without faith – nothing else will work. It is the vital ingredient, according to the Bible.

It is absolutely impossible for you to live and act in a way that will please Him without faith. Why? The answer is that, without this principle – we will be practical atheists. We will have large theological vocabularies, deep time-commitments to our churches, heads full of knowledge, but our lives will still seem like we don't believe in God.

In **Romans 14:23**, Paul says, *“Whatsoever is not of faith, is sin.”* What he is saying is that – lacking these core beliefs of **Hebrews 11:6** – every word, thought or deed you do will be tainted with selfishness. Include the core beliefs – and every word, thought, and deed can be an act of faith, empowered by grace.

Hebrews 11:6 describes the two things that are necessary to perceive life correctly. They are the two lenses through which we are to see life. The one is that God is, and the other is that God is a rewarder of them who diligently seek Him. Now, Scripture is saying, unless a person approaches life with those two thoughts on their mind, unless those two lenses colour everything they see, their life will simply be one of selfish existence. They will think, speak and act like God is not.

A Christian who is a practical atheist lives this way. They, firstly, do not see God in the situation. Secondly, they fail to see that God is good – a pleasure, a reward, to one going after Him with their whole heart. Thus, they either never get off the ground serving God, or if they do, their service will lack the right motives, and will certainly not rely on God as the means. In short, as the Bible says, it will be impossible for them to please God.

We always have before us the choice to walk by sight, or by faith. We can either see life in terms of circumstances, human logic, and personal experience, or we can see through those things, to see the hidden reality. Not the fairy tale, not the imaginary ideas, not even the future. The hidden reality. It is what is – but it is not readily seen. It is the truth. It is the facts that undergird what is seen.

This is the description of faith in **Hebrews 11:1**: *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* Faith treats the invisible as visible, it treats the unseen as the reason for the seen. To live on the five senses is to live on the mere skin of life. To live on only what you can see and make sense of, is actually to live a skin-deep life – where you act and respond to only what you hear and see.

God is saying, to even begin to please Him, you must see *through* life. You must see behind life. You must see the engine inside the car, the players and crew working things backstage, the heart pumping the blood inside that beautiful exterior. You must see beyond the surface of life to the true. So let's take a closer look at this verse. In order to be practicing believers, and not practicing atheists, we need to believe three things:

1. The reality of God

“He that cometh to God must believe that He is.” The one seeking to walk with God, the one seeking to fellowship with God in any real sense, the one desiring to live the Christian life in a way that pleases God, must believe in the reality of God. It is an essential obligation – they must believe that God is real and God is alive.

He is. He exists. He is truth. If you want to have a Christian life that pleases God, then you must make the mental habit of seeing that the invisible is actually the reason for the visible. That God is. But I believe it is more than that. Believing that God is, is not merely a belief that God exists. James tells us in **James 2:19**: *“Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”*

Believing in the reality of God does not mean He exists in some faraway sense. It means believing He is the centre of my life, right now. He exists here. He is here, now. His presence is here, now. He is watching. He is listening. He is speaking. He is leading and directing. He is empowering. He is working. He is blessing. He is training. He is comforting. He is working!

This is the reality of God. And when God the Son walked the earth, His lips poured out speech about the reality of His Father. *"My Father worketh hitherto, and I work"* says Jesus in **John 5:17**. His Father was not static, or passive, but working. **John 5:19** tells us, *"The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do: for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise."*

Likewise, Jesus said to the unbelieving people in **John 8:38**: *"I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father."* Jesus believed God is – and it affected what He did, but they simply behaved their beliefs. Consider how God revealed Himself to Moses. Moses said of proclaiming God to the Jews:

And they shall say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, 'I AM THAT I AM,' and He said, 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.'

Exodus 3:13

God calls Himself I AM. He is. He needs no one to exist. He is the centre – the source. He is the ultimate reason for everything. He is the all in all. He is First. Question – is this one of the lenses we see life through? Do we look at even the mundane details of our lives with the thoughts: 'God is the I AM. He is the reason this thing is. He created it. All things owe their existence to Him. I orbit Him. He is here right now.'

Consider the impact of believing He is on your behaviour – the presence of God right here. Would you sin, with the thought 'God is here'? Would you avoid praying or reading the Word with the thought 'God is speaking.' Would you even make a move out the door without confessing your total dependence on Him, if one of the two pillars of your life-view was – 'God is'?

Didn't Paul say in **Acts 17:28**: *"For in Him we live, and move, and have our being."* And our Lord Jesus said, *"Without Me, ye can do nothing"* (**John 15:5**). It is when we do not believe that He is, that we act like we can do anything without Him.

Consider the impact of not believing He is. Sin incubates where I forget God. I sin when I think no one is watching. Temptation grows in strength when God is not the centre of my thoughts. If I don't believe God is the sustainer of my life, I act as a law unto myself. I believe that I AM – a ruler of myself. There is no way faith and sin can co-exist. A person cannot simultaneously believe God is – that He is the I AM – and also believe, 'I can sin and do my own thing.'

Is one of the lenses that colour your view of life 'God is'? God is the First One – He is the centre of life. You don't make God the centre of your life – He is the centre of life. It is not that we have

to try and place God first – it is that we have to stop believing we are first, stop believing He orbits us, and embrace the Reality of God.

He is the I AM. He occupies First Place in the universe. He is the beginning and end of all things – the highest reason, and the ultimate objective. He is the only point of life, and the main idea. He is the priority, the truth, the invisible source of everything visible. However, Scripture points out a second thing we are to believe: “He that cometh to God must believe that He is... a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” This is:

2. The reward of God

Scripture commands us to go further than simply believing that God is the I AM. It commands us to hold inseparably with that belief – that God is a rewarder. He rewards. There will be joy in seeking God. There will be payment, satisfaction, good things, for coming to God – for keeping in focus that He is the centre of life. He brings happiness and contentment.

Every human being does what they do for a pursuit of happiness. All humans gravitate toward seeking the health of their own souls. Scripture says this in **Ephesians 5:29**: “*For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it.*” People by the design of their own hearts seek meaning, joy, and fulfilment. People long to be happy. People are restless and seek to change things in their lives in the pursuit of happiness.

Well, God insists that humans realise He is the ultimate fountain of happiness, joy and satisfaction. **Hebrews 11:6** defines the other pillar of faith as a belief that the pursuit of happiness in God will be a fruitful pursuit. The one exercising faith, the one making God their chief joy, is not gambling. They are not risking. They are assured that this pursuit will bear fruit.

Faith believes not only that God is the I AM, but that the I AM is indescribably sweet to the redeemed soul. Faith is more than a mental agreement as to the existence of God; it is a joyful hunger for more of God. Yes, faith says, God is real – He is – but He is also sweet, pleasurable and enjoyable. The Bible is not embarrassed to speak of the life of joy and pleasure in Him. It unashamedly describes following God as the most enjoyable thing you can do:

- **Psalm 16:11**: “*Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.*”
- **Psalm 36:7-9**: “*How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings. They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house; and Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures. For with Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we see light.*”
- **John 15:11**: “*These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.*” (These are Christ's own happy words.)

See, many Christians try to live right with only a grim determination that they are philosophically correct in their approach to life. They see no positive in seeking God; indeed,

they think it selfish to think on such things. But the fact is, God is honoured when people make Him their highest joy.

Christians who do not actively focus on the fact that God is a rewarder will find their own heart betraying them. Your heart was made to seek reward – to seek pleasure. If you are embarrassed to seek it in God, you will keep finding that your heart seeks it somewhere else anyway.

God is not a ruler to be observed from a distance; He is everything your heart craves – to be pursued. God Himself is the reward. To Abraham, He said in **Genesis 15:1**: *“Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.”* Knowing the awesome character of God, finding out His perfection is the antidote to our every need and weakness, that His glory is in fact our deepest satisfaction – this is a belief we are to have as we approach life.

Consider how this will affect your life. Consider the impact as you look at prayer, your quiet time, your service for God, your decisions to witness for Him, your everyday acts of obedience – does it not energise them with infectious happiness – that it is a good and kind God commanding and orchestrating life? How miserable to serve a false god whom you must appease, never knowing if he will be satisfied, moody or angry.

We serve a God who has not only reconciled us to Himself through Calvary, but now offers pleasures, joys, and meaning if we will seek Him. It perfumes our life with joy unspeakable. We’re not denying the Christian life has suffering and sacrifice, but it is always the suffering of a joyful people – a people contented, satisfied in their God.

See, let’s reverse it and see the implications of not believing He is a rewarder. Every act of sin is rooted in a belief that ‘I Am’ and that sin is a rewarder of those who diligently seek after it. When I sin, is it not because I am seeking a reward, I am seeking pleasure, joy, happiness? I am seeking my own good. That is not always the problem, the problem is seeking it outside of God.

Unbelief embraces the promises of sin. It has evidence and assurance that sin brings pleasure. Unbelief pursues the reward of sin. Faith believes the reward of God is a better and higher reward, without evil consequences. For that reason, it abandons the short-term pleasures of sin for the soul-satisfying pleasures of God.

Do you have that lens in your spiritual spectacles? As you look out on life, are you constantly confronted with the thought that God is good, and that pursuing Him is always the best thing you can do? Do you actively see going after God’s way in obedience will be the most enjoyable thing possible? Or is your spiritual horizon a somewhat grey, gloomy scene, hoping for a little joy here and there, as you plod on out of duty?

Please let the Scripture sink into your heart. Without a belief that God is a rewarder – it is impossible to please Him. This is the design of your heart. Flaunt it at your own peril. Do not be so proud as to think you do not seek reward – Scripture says you do – and commands you to seek it in God. But there is a third aspect to our faith that the Bible commands us to have:

3. The responsibility

We are to see that God is the I AM. We are to see that God is the ultimate joy of our hearts. These two lenses must colour every word, thought and deed of our lives. However, there is a condition in this Scripture. It says, 'He that comes to God must believe that He is a rewarder of them that *diligently* seek Him.' God is a rewarder – but a rewarder to the diligent seeker.

See, the Greek carries this idea: "to the one diligently seeking God, He turns out to be a rewarder." In other words, the reward is not always immediate. God's satisfying nature is revealed to the thirsty heart – it does not drop onto the sleeping bed of the sluggard. There is a responsibility I have. It requires persistence – continual seeking.

Faith includes this vital element – God will be sweet when I pursue Him with my whole heart. He reserves His blessings for One pursuing Him beyond the down days, beyond the days where He seems to have hidden Himself. He will turn out to be a Rewarder. But the reward is for the responsible – those who put in a 100% effort in their desire for God.

Diligent seeking – this carries the idea of searching, seeking after, craving. It even carries the idea of demanding. In short, it means I should desire God more than anything else. God will turn out to be my highest joy, when I seek Him as just that – my highest, sweetest joy. As we said, faith is not simply a mental assent to the existence of God, it is a soul-hunger: I want God as my all in all. God is my first love.

The Bible is very clear that God does not want disinterested, half-hearted followers. His distaste for those who are trying Him out as an option is heard in **Revelation 3:15-16** to the Laodicean church: *"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."*

See, there is a very good reason for God wanting us to seek Him with our whole hearts. Simply consider the logic of the passage – God is the I AM. He is the centre of all things, and therefore the priority. Secondly, not only is He the priority, but He is the highest benefit to the creature. What could be more logical than to make the Priority of the universe, who is the highest joy of our hearts, our greatest pursuit?

People diligently pursue many things. They pursue money through unbelievable sacrifice, and sometimes evil means. They pursue pleasure in food, sex, thrill-seeking. They pursue fame. They pursue power through corporate climbing and politics. But take some time to simply gather some Scripture that filled with the injunction to go after God with all your heart:

- **Psalm 119:2:** *"Blessed are they that keep His testimonies, and that seek Him with the whole heart."*
- **Psalm 119:10:** *"With my whole heart have I sought Thee: O let me not wander from Thy commandments."*
- **Jeremiah 29:13:** *"And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart."*

- **Deuteronomy 10:12-13:** *“And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul. To keep the commandments of the LORD, and His statutes, which I command thee this day, for thy good?”*

The reason is that, if God is the greatest pursuit of all, if He is the highest point of life, then seeking Him with all your heart is the most sensible thing you can do. That’s why Paul calls it your *“reasonable service”* in **Romans 12:1**. Place your maximum effort, your fullest pursuit, the bulk of your energies, into the search for God.

What is this seeking? It is the attitude that governs every act in your life. *“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest”* (**Ecclesiastes 9:10**). In other words – do every single thing in your life – from the mundane acts of washing to the sacred acts of prayer, with a wholehearted Godward focus – where He is the reason and the source, and the ultimate reward.

Sin is easy. We gravitate toward the lazy state of our hearts, that wishes a minimum effort would bring maximum results. But faith reverses this trend. It diligently pursues God. The natural inclination is sin, but better reward requires more effort. The gravity of sin must be resisted with a God-dependent, 100% effort.

There are no spiritual shortcuts. You might think you can cheat the system, cut the corners of the corporate world, but you cannot outwit God. God will be found by those who seek Him on His terms.

So the Christian life cannot be successful unless we see the **reality** of God in everything. He is here – He is the centre, the source. We must see that He is a **rewarder**, good, the ultimate satisfaction of my heart. And we must see that we have a **responsibility** – to seek Him with all our heart, soul and mind, to know Him as He wishes us to.

God is glorified when humans believe what is true: He is the centre of all things, and He is the highest joy of a human being. Are you practicing atheist? May you and I overcome that by seeing all of life with the truth that God is, God is a rewarder, and the reasonable reaction is then, in all things, to love Him with all my heart soul and mind.