

Sermon 16: the argument from experience

OUTLINE

Objections
Examples

INTRODUCTION

Last week we began to enter into some of the more subjective aspects of apologetics looking at the argument from desire. Today we want to go a little deeper into the subjective side of things looking at the argument from experience. The argument is a simple one: millions of Christians of all ages, education levels and cultural experiences testify to a real experience of knowing God. The various experiences include, answers to prayer, sightings of the miraculous, a transformed character and life, joy inexpressible and full of glory, a sense of presence, an overwhelming sense of guilt and terror, etc.

In non-Western cultures this is one of the most important and powerful ways to speak about God but we in the West with our history of Modernism which is biased towards a naturalistic explanation of all things and sees empiricism as the only valid foundation for epistemology, this argument has fallen on hard times. So today as we consider this type of argument we will firstly answer some objections and secondly give some examples.

Objections

There are two main objections that are raised whenever Christians begin to tell their testimonies. Firstly, that this form of knowledge is automatically invalid because it cannot be verified and it is brushed away as irrelevant. Or secondly, there is the retort that every religion has claims to experiences and no one can know which ones are true. The first is held by those who have a naturalist epistemology, the second by those who have a post-modern epistemology.

These objections are as all objections are, biased, they are built on certain assumptions which too need to be laid bare and inspected. My initial response is a very basic one which goes something like this: knowledge from experience could be wrong but it could also be right. It is true that a person could think a thing to be real and be mistaken, or they could be deceitful, or they could also be correct.

Philosopher Richard Swinburne has two principles that he uses to make space for this form of argument at the table.

The first principle is the principle of credulity. This is what we could call an innocent until proven guilty approach. It says something like this: unless there is good evidence to the contrary, if someone seems to experience God, then they should believe God exists.

Why is this an acceptable form of argument?

Those who object to this form of knowing those from a verificationist perspective have assumptions in their view which bias them against this sort of evidence. Evidence we use to convict criminals in a court of law by the way. We must highlight that the empirical view is not neutral but value laden and can lay unnecessary requirements upon knowledge. We could add for those who don't like this form of argument and who hold to a higher standard

of 'objective' verification that this is a false standard that they do not practice in their own lives. Anytime anyone relays a conversation they had with someone else, or tells of an experience that they had, we do not stop them and ask them to provide third party witnesses, photos, and expert opinions before we accept them as true. When a person refuses the possibility that someone has experienced God it tells us all about the commitments of their own worldview.

If we insist that every experience be verified, this leads us into an infinite regression. We would have to verify every experience that we are using or appealing to act as a foundation for the present experience.

The second principle Swinburne advances is the principle of testimony. Here is the basis of it, testimony is usually reliable. We do not typically think that people are lying or have been deceived. We do not typically go around accusing everyone of being a liar or having been duped. The burden of proof then lies not on the one who have had the experience to convince the sceptics, but on the sceptics who are applying an atypical amount of scepticism. And with the millions of people who all testify to a common experience of God and salvation, this becomes more so the case. This principle does not mean we believe all that everyone says, but when it comes to a common testimony by millions of people from different cultural backgrounds and educational levels all saying the same thing it becomes more weighty than the blasé disregard that evidentialists have towards those who talk about their experiences of God. We are not advocating gullibility but a legitimate place at the table for subjective knowledge.

Examples

There are many examples in the Bible and history of those who have experienced God. I love how John Stott speaks of God as the one who comes seeking us, or as a famous poem puts it, God is 'the Hound of Heaven.' At first it sounds like a derogatory remark but the Bible employs pictures of God using other humble metaphors like Shepherd which make it fitting. The reason it is important to show that God hunts us down is because there are many who speak of God as our projections or wish fulfilments, that we are looking for something we want to be there and will something that isn't there into being. My own experience was a case of running from God and being chased down, and so was the apostle Paul's. Paul gives his personal credentials in Phil. 3 as a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Benjaminite, as well as a Pharisee zealous for the law. Acts 8:1 shows us Saul, before he was named Paul standing in approval at the stoning of Stephen. In Acts 9 while still breathing out murder and threats we see the Lord seek Paul. When Paul retells this account in Acts 26:14, listen to what Christ says to him, 'And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' The goads are the things used to prod the animals on. In other words, Christ had been prodding Paul before this point, and he had been resisting. Romans 7 talks about Paul's guilt before the law, no doubt he would have been affected by watching the stoning of Stephen. The Spirit had already been working on Paul's conscience and when Christ appears on the Damascus road, with witnesses around who heard the voice but did not see what Paul saw, Paul the unwilling convert is called to heel.

If you are here today and you are a believer, and you remember the time that you hated God and the time that you turned to Him, you will know what I am talking about. You will know the willfulness of your own heart as you resisted the truth you knew in your conscience. You will know your guilt from the sin you chose. You will remember distinct times when thoughts were suppressed and silenced and the opposite deliberately chosen.

You will know your unworthiness and the wonder of God's grace in saving you, the amazing reality of Christ's sacrifice and how it could wash away your guilt and bring you into God's family. Perhaps you did not have all the categories to put it in those words but you can identify with the experience. For those who converted from early childhood, they may not have the same experience of conversion so distinct in their memories, but a conversion they would have experienced at some point as they moved from death to life. They share now all the signs of life that any regenerate person experiences. They are hungry for the word, they thirst for God's presence, they cry out to God as Father, they love the family of believers, they hate sin and mourn the remaining love of sin in their hearts, etc.

John Stott shares the experience of Augustine: 'He was born in North Africa (in what we now call Algeria) in the middle of the fourth century. Already in his teens he was leading a dissolute, even promiscuous, life, enslaved by his passions. He wrote in his *Confessions*: Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air. The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love's serenity and lust's darkness. Confusion of the two things boiled within me. It seized hold of my youthful weakness sweeping me through the precipitous rocks of desire to submerge me in a whirlpool of vice.

Even while half-drowned in sin, Augustine also plunged into study, and his studies took him first to Carthage, and then to Rome and to Milan. A great tug of war was going on in his mind between Christianity (which at this time he rejected) and Manicheism (which he had embraced). In this turmoil of moral shame and intellectual confusion he found himself in utter misery. Yet, through his inner restlessness of mind and conscience, as also through the prayers and tears of his saintly mother Monica, and through the kindly admonitions of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, Jesus Christ was surely pursuing him.

As with Saul of Tarsus, so with Augustine of Hippo, the climax came suddenly. He went out into the garden attached to his lodgings, accompanied by his friend Alypius. He threw himself down under a tree and let his tears flow freely, as he cried out, 'How long, O Lord?' As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again, 'pick up and read, pick up and read ...' I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find ... So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Romans 13:13-14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.

Augustine attributed his experience to the sheer grace, that is, the free and unmerited favour, of God. He claimed that God had quickened all five of his spiritual senses—hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch:

You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.¹

Another famous example is C. S. Lewis: 'Lewis was an Oxford and Cambridge scholar, literary critic, children's fiction-writer and Christian apologist.

1 Stott, J. (2003). [Why I Am a Christian](#) (pp. 21-23). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.

For some time before his conversion Lewis was aware that God was after him. In his autobiographical sketch *Surprised by Joy* he piles up metaphors to illustrate it. First, God was 'the great Angler', playing his fish, 'and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue'.¹⁴ Next, he likened God to a cat chasing a mouse. 'Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about "man's search for God". To me ... they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat.' Thirdly, he likened God to a pack of hounds. 'The fox had been dislodged from the Hegelian Wood and was now running in the open ... bedraggled and weary, hounds barely a field behind. And nearly everyone now (one way or another) in the pack ...'¹⁶ Finally, God was the Divine Chessplayer, gradually manoeuvring him into an impossible position. 'All over the board my pieces were in the most disadvantageous positions. Soon I could no longer cherish even the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make His final moves.' So Lewis entitled his penultimate chapter 'Checkmate'.¹⁸

Lewis's actual moment of surrender to Christ in Oxford he described in memorable words: You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?... The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.²

Conversion experiences, experiences of assurance, answers to prayer, inward convictions wrought by the Spirit, peace, joy, presence and many other things are the experience of Christian believers. It is not an argument on its own that can grant objective truth to others but it is a sign or marker which can point others in the right direction.

For this reason your testimony whether it is a testimony of your conversion or of God's daily faithfulness to you as a believer, is important.

What about the objection, 'how can you know your experience is the real one?' we would answer that our final authority is not experience but the word of God that interprets it to us. We believe there is a real devil and many real yet counterfeit experiences to be had, and there are a lot of people who are self-deceived. We have the confidence of seeing our own experiences of guilt, salvation, adoption, prayer, joy, etc recorded in the Word.

2 Stott, J. (2003). [Why I Am a Christian](#) (pp. 24–26). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.