



# Lesson 1

## The Many Faces and Causes of Unbelief

Apologetics Press Introductory Christian Evidences Correspondence Course

# THE MANY FACES AND CAUSES OF UNBELIEF

**W**hy do many obviously intelligent people prefer to believe that there is no God? Humanity prides itself on its freedom of choice. Human beings are free moral agents who have been given the right to make their own decisions. Each person decides what he wants to wear, what he wants to eat, and where he wants to go. But most important, each person decides what he or she wants to believe. A speech given by the Old Testament character Joshua allows us to see just how free each one of us is to choose if we want to believe in God. Speaking to the Jewish nation thousands of years ago, Joshua said: “And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). Joshua’s point could not have been clearer: the Jews—just like every other nation and all individual people—had the freedom of choice to believe, or not to believe, in God.

Freedom, however, always comes with responsibility. With freedom of choice comes the responsibility to think carefully, choose wisely, and act forcefully. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every human being to recognize, believe, and obey the **truth**.

## FACES OF UNBELIEF

Throughout history, many people have decided not to believe in God. They have gone by many different names—atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, infidels, etc. In this section, we will look at specific types of unbelievers.

### Atheists

The word atheism means “without God.” The atheist is the person who says that there is no God. The late Carl Sagan was one of the world’s most famous atheists. He summed up atheism when he declared: “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.” An atheist is one who plainly states that God does not exist.

However, it is much easier for someone to call himself an atheist than it is for him to defend such a position. In order to **know** that there is no God, a person would have to know **every single fact** in the Universe, because the one fact that he did not know might be the fact that God exists. For instance, if a person had a unique, blue-striped shirt, he could not prove that no other shirt in the world was like it unless he had seen every other shirt in the world.

The atheist cannot prove that God does not exist, because he cannot possibly know every other fact there is to know, any more than a man with a blue-stripped shirt can see every other shirt that exists.

The actual truth of the matter is that most atheists do not deal with facts at all. They are so set against the idea of God that they dismiss or ignore the evidence that proves His existence. The late Isaac Asimov, another famous atheist, once said: “Emotionally, I am an atheist. I don’t have the evidence to prove that God doesn’t exist, but I so strongly suspect he doesn’t that I don’t want to waste my time.” Atheism does not answer the evidence for God’s existence, and cannot offer a reasonable alternative for belief in Him.

## Agnostics

The word agnostic means “without knowledge.” The agnostic does not boldly proclaim that God does not exist. Instead, he suggests no one can **know** whether or not God exists because there simply is not enough evidence upon which to base a conclusion. In essence, then, agnosticism says: “I don’t know, you don’t know, nobody knows, and **nobody** can know if there is a God.” Agnostics frequently point out that man cannot know everything, and that he never has been able to “detect” God with his limited mind and capabilities. Thus, the agnostic suggests, people should quit searching. What the agnostic fails to realize, however, is that this concept must work both directions. That is to say, man must be unable to reach up to God, and God must be unable to reach down to man. But God is not unable to reach men, for He is not limited by the same constraints in time and knowledge as humans. An infinite God could make Himself known to us any time He wanted—and there is nothing to prevent Him from doing so. Furthermore, there is good evidence that He has done exactly that. The agnostic’s claim of “I can’t know” really is a mask that he puts on to hide the fact that he realizes there is ample evidence (that he can neither explain away nor disprove) to establish the existence of God. Perhaps the agnostic cannot find God for the same reason a thief cannot find a policeman!

## Skeptic

The skeptic is the person who **doubts** that there is a God. The standard dictionary definition is quite revealing when it describes a skeptic as one who holds to “the doctrine that true knowledge or knowledge in a particular area is uncertain and who has doubts concerning basic religious principles.” Notice that the skeptic does not claim knowledge of God is **unattainable** (as the agnostic does), but rather is “uncertain.” The skeptic is not prepared to accept anything except that which can be verified empirically (that is to say, by using the five senses). To the skeptic, then, science becomes the only valid method

of “proving” anything. Since God cannot be seen, tasted, heard, touched, or smelled, then skeptics say that either He does not exist or that He cannot be very important even if He does. However, the skeptic’s position is faulty because even he “knows” some things exist that cannot be verified by the scientific method. Science never will be able to observe or explain such concepts as love, hate, sorrow, or joy. Science never will be able to explain why a man in a foxhole during a war throws himself on a hand grenade to save his fellow soldiers. The sad part is that the skeptic has paid a high price for his skepticism—the rejection and abandonment of some of the human race’s most important and cherished concepts. Why? In order to be able to say: I **doubt** that God exists.

## *Infidel*

The infidel is the person who not only refuses to believe in God himself, but who also is intolerant of, and actively opposes, those who do. The infidel speaks out against God, and does all he can to condemn religion. The infidel despises God and the Bible—and anyone who believes in either.

## CAUSES OF UNBELIEF

Up to this point, we have looked at different categories of people who do not believe in God. But why, exactly, do they refuse to believe in Him? For the rest of this lesson, we would like to examine some of the reasons for disbelief in the God of the Bible.

### *Bias Against God*

There is little doubt that many people find belief in God difficult because there is in their mind a bias that sways them against it. This built-in bias is what some have referred to as “the prejudice of unbelief.” Stanley Sayers put it like this: “One of the significant and obvious reasons the unbeliever remains an unbeliever is that **he likes it that way**. In fact, any evidence of any source or to any degree fails to move him from his position if his heart is strongly bent **against** evidence and **toward** unbelief.”

At times, people suffer from extreme prejudice, especially when it comes to belief in God. They operate within a framework of bias against the God of the Bible. The Christian God is utterly repugnant to them because He represents a threat to man’s own desires and ambitions. In other words, the will of man is on a collision course with the will of God. Such a course leads inevitably to a conflict of interests. Some people apparently would rather die in sin than live in obedience.

Paul reminded the first-century Christians in Rome of those who, “knowing God, glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks; but became vain in their

reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened. And even as they **refused** to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up unto a reprobate mind” (Romans 1:21,28). The problem about which the apostle wrote was not a failure to accept what was **unknowable** (the text in Romans clearly indicates that these were people who could, and did, **know** of the existence of God). Rather, it was a problem of refusing to **accept** what was **knowable**—i.e., God’s reality.

Those to whom Paul referred had such a built-in prejudice against God that they **refused** to have God in their knowledge. This situation, then, caused the apostle to write (by inspiration of the Holy Spirit) that “professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:22). In biblical usage, the term “fool” generally does not indicate an unintelligent person, and it certainly is not used here in such a fashion. Instead, the term carries both a moral and religious judgment, as it does in Romans 1. This is why the psalmist (again, by inspiration) wrote that “the fool has said in his heart, there is no God” (14:1). If “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10), then, conversely, foolishness finds its origin in the rejection of God. Isaiah referred to a man as a fool whose “mind plots iniquity to practice ungodliness” (Isaiah 32:6, RSV). Bias against God therefore has become one of the chief causes of unbelief, which no doubt explains why the writer of the book of Hebrews warned: “Beware brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief” (Hebrews 3:12).

## *Influence of Parents and Upbringing*

Surely one of the most powerful influences on any human being is parents. Generally speaking, mothers and fathers not only are the **first** influences in a child’s life, but also are a **continuing** influence. It has been said that a child’s mind is like Jell-O<sup>®</sup>, and that the parents’ task is to put in all the “good stuff” before it “sets.”

The task of putting the right things into the mind of a child is difficult, and requires much patience. It is a 24-hour, full-time process that should take place continuously—when sitting with a child, riding in a car, eating a meal together, and even while watching television (see Deuteronomy 6:6-7). Sometimes the education of a child is accomplished by instruction, which is why parents are encouraged to rear their children in “the training and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Other times it is accomplished by discipline, as the Proverbs writer noted when he commented: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” (29:15).

On occasion, however, parents fail to teach their children to believe in God. Sometimes they even teach a child **not** to believe in God. If children see a parent who does not care about God, or is skeptical of all evidence relating to

God's existence, that child is likely to end up just as indifferent and skeptical as his or her parents. The spiritual condition of entire nations has been affected adversely because of the failure of parents to instruct their children properly regarding belief in God.

## Education

Certainly, one of the most important causes of unbelief is improper education. Proper education is a wonderful tool that can be used to build better communities and nations. But some types of education are bad—not only for individuals, but for societies as well. Any type of education that attempts to destroy belief in a divine Creator (God) is a negative system that can lead only to ruin. As sad as it is, the kind of education now being offered in many public schools has the potential to destroy faith in God. One of the main tools used to destroy such a faith is the teaching of organic evolution. For several decades, evolution has been taught as a scientific fact in many elementary, junior high, and senior high schools, as well as in most colleges and universities. As a result, when textbooks and teachers present organic evolution as something “all reputable scientists believe,” many students believe in the theory without ever being exposed to the opposing evidence which shows that creation by God is a much better explanation for the origin of the Universe and its inhabitants. Acceptance of the naturalistic concept of evolution leads quite naturally to disbelief in God.

## Immorality

Many people will not believe in God because, if they do, then they will have to change the way they live. These people may be involved in sins such as homosexuality, greed, adultery, or any number of actions that are contrary to the laws of God. As soon as they admit that there is a God, then they also must admit that God wants them to do, or not do, certain things. They do not want a God Who tells them what to do, so they simply choose to believe that there is no God. Psalm 14:1 discusses this clearly: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they have done abominable works.” One of the most common reasons people choose not to believe in God is because they do not want to give up their sinful lifestyles.

## Scientific Materialism

We are living in an era where science rules, and where we observe its accomplishments everyday. Science has been successful in doing wonderful things—such as eradicating smallpox, putting men on the Moon, preventing polio, and lengthening human life spans. However, while we should be grateful for the strides that science has made, we likewise should acknowledge all that science owes to God. In Genesis 1:28, God told man to “subdue the Earth

and have dominion over it.” Surely this statement by God is the cornerstone, or charter, of science.

Yet undoubtedly one of the greatest obstacles to belief in God is the attitude that science somehow has made belief in God obsolete. Many scientists today claim that the **only** way to discover something is by empirical observation. If something cannot be observed by the five senses, then either it does not exist or is not important. Of course, since God cannot be observed by these five senses, to many scientists (and others who have adopted such a view) He does not exist or is not very important even if He does.

## Intellectual Peer Pressure

It is not pleasant to be labeled as stupid, dumb, ignorant, or moronic. Yet those labels have been applied to people who are willing to defend the existence of God and the biblical concept of creation. Thousands of highly intelligent people are scientists, and many of them believe in evolution. The idea being suggested, then, is that “all intelligent people” believe in evolution. After all, how could so many “smart” people be wrong?

However, the idea that truth is determined by popular opinion or majority vote is false. A thing may be (and often is) true even when accepted by only a small minority. In fact, scientific successes often have occurred because researchers rebelled against the majority opinion for the sake of truth. Just because millions of people believe something, does not make it right. If something is true, stating it a million times does not make it any truer, and if it is false, stating it a million times does not make it any less false.

## Evil, Pain, and Suffering

Another frequent cause of unbelief is the existence of evil, pain, and suffering in the world. If there is an all-powerful God, and if He is all-good, then why do bad things happen to innocent victims (such as babies)? Many have abandoned belief in God because of the presence of suffering in their lives or in the lives of those close to them. Some have lost children, others have uttered what they believe to be unanswered prayers, and still others have seen their best friends taken from them. Faced with these terrible tragedies, they have decided that God must not exist because if He did, then surely He would have done something to prevent such events.

Here is a brief response to this problem. When God created everything, He said that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). However, the first man and woman (Adam and Eve) sinned against God and brought pain and suffering into the world. God always has given human beings the right to make their own decisions. He did not create humans as robots that have no choices. Much of

the suffering that is present in the world today is a result of the misuse of the freedom of choice of both past generations and our own generation.

Furthermore, there are times when suffering actually is beneficial. Think of the man whose chest begins to throb as he begins to have a heart attack, or the woman whose side starts to ache at the beginning of appendicitis. Pain often sends us to the doctor for prevention or cure. Also, pain and tragedy help humans develop some of the most treasured traits in society—bravery, heroism, self-sacrifice, and numerous others.

The fact that even Jesus, as the Son of God, was subjected to pain and suffering (Hebrews 5:8; 1 Peter 2:21ff.) proves that God loves and cares for His creation. God could have abandoned us to our own sinful devices but instead, “God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

## CONCLUSION

All too often man’s “wisdom” has replaced God’s (see 1 Corinthians 1:18-25), causing many to lose their way in what has become one of the most horrible, and yet one of the most common, tragedies of our day. The price humans have paid for being intellectually learned but spiritually ignorant—the loss of their souls—has been far higher than we ever could have imagined.

The Lord is happy to help those today who live in honest unbelief. He has provided ample evidence so that they might believe. But what about those who refuse to believe in God, in spite of the evidence? The apostle John said: “But the cowardly, **unbelieving**, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

Cover: Background—Charles Darwin, age 30. Foreground (clockwise left to right)—Richard Dawkins (credit below) Thomas Huxley, Herbert W. Spencer, Carl Sagan, Charles Darwin (credit below).

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# Questions—Lesson 1

## TRUE OR FALSE

Write TRUE or FALSE in the blanks before the following statements.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Many intelligent people in the world today do not believe in God.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. One of the main themes in the Bible is the evil results of unbelief.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. God is responsible for the wrong decisions made by man.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Freedom never comes with responsibility.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. An atheist is a person who says there are many different gods.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Pride is one reason why some people will not believe in God.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Parents never can influence a child to disbelieve in God.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Any type of education is a terrible thing.

## MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the correct answer(s).

- 1. Which one of the following is **not** a cause of unbelief?
  - (a) Upbringing
  - (b) Improper education
  - (c) Reading the Bible
  - (d) Immorality
- 2. A person who says: "I don't know, you don't know, and no one can know about God."
  - (a) Agnostic
  - (b) Infidel
  - (c) Atheist
  - (d) Skeptic
- 3. Which one of these is not something that empirical science uses to observe things?
  - (a) Touch
  - (b) Sight
  - (c) Smell
  - (d) Emotions

4. Which tactic of unbelief uses the idea that “everyone is doing it and so should you?”
- (a) Immorality (b) Intellectual peer pressure  
(c) Influence of parents (d) Pride
5. Pain sometimes can be useful when it helps us to do which of the following things?
- (a) Curse God (b) Disbelieve in God  
(c) Go see a doctor (d) Be cruel to others

### FILL IN THE BLANKS

- Freedom always comes with \_\_\_\_\_.
- It is much \_\_\_\_\_ for someone to call himself an atheist than it is for him to \_\_\_\_\_ such a position.
- Many people will not \_\_\_\_\_ in God because, if they do, then they will have to \_\_\_\_\_ the way they \_\_\_\_\_.
- Many \_\_\_\_\_ today believe that the only way to discover facts is by \_\_\_\_\_ observation.
- The idea that \_\_\_\_\_ is determined by \_\_\_\_\_ opinion or majority vote is \_\_\_\_\_.
- The fact that \_\_\_\_\_ was subjected to pain and suffering proves that God \_\_\_\_\_ us.

### COMPLETE THE BIBLE VERSES (NEW KING JAMES VERSION)

- Psalm 14:1: “The \_\_\_\_\_ has said in his heart ‘There is no \_\_\_\_\_.’ They are \_\_\_\_\_, they have done abominable \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Revelation 21:8: “But the cowardly, \_\_\_\_\_, abominable, murderers, \_\_\_\_\_, sorcerers, idolaters, and all \_\_\_\_\_ shall have their part in the \_\_\_\_\_ which burns with fire and brimstone which is the second \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Proverbs 29:15: “The rod and rebuke give \_\_\_\_\_, but a \_\_\_\_\_ left to himself brings \_\_\_\_\_ to his \_\_\_\_\_.”

4. Joshua 24:15: “And if it seems \_\_\_\_\_ to you to serve the Lord, \_\_\_\_\_ for yourselves this day whom you will \_\_\_\_\_, whether the \_\_\_\_\_ which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for \_\_\_\_\_ and my \_\_\_\_\_ we will serve the \_\_\_\_\_ .”

5. Romans 5:8: “God demonstrates His own \_\_\_\_\_ toward us, in that while we were still \_\_\_\_\_, Christ \_\_\_\_\_ for us.”

### NOTES/COMMENTS

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NAME \_\_\_\_\_

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