

THE ALEPH COURSE.

9 : MEETING GOD.

I've said most of what I want to say, in outline rather than detail. If it doesn't seem like much, that's part of the intention; I suggest that most presentations of Christianity include too much, and my presentation is a rather complicated way of proposing that a great deal of the baggage is unnecessary.

I've explained why I want to believe. I've said something about evidence, and something about why it might not necessarily be conclusive. Is that enough for you ?

Well, it doesn't sound like very much.

If that were all, I'm not sure that I'd be quite so keen either. So I thought that before we finished I should say something of the further reasons for believing which come as you practise the Christian life. I've avoided calling it further evidence, because it's often not the sort of stuff you can measure and dissect; rather, it's the confidence you build up in a system when you use it day in and day out and it never lets you down.

I used to know the reasons why people originally accepted the atomic theory. I learnt them at school - the law of multiple proportions, the determination of atomic weights, and other things I've forgotten. But I *believe* in atoms simply because the hypothesis works reliably all the time.

This account will necessarily be personal, but any Christian will have something more or less on the same lines to say. It's unlikely to be identical, because we're not identical. (We're not atoms !) We see things in different ways; observations which I find convincing won't impress some other people, and vice versa. That's only to be expected if God has a personal relationship with each of us; two people with a common friend are likely to have different views of the friend.

So what I am trying to say is that I believe that I can see evidence in my life of God's actions. They have changed the way I live, and they have changed the sort of person I am. And it all fits very well with the ideas I've been presenting throughout this series.

NOT EVIDENCE.

I have had what seems to be an unusually peaceful and happy life. I am reasonably healthy, and quietly prosperous. When I look back, I can see what might be a pattern in my life, with different events and decisions contributing subtly to my journey to the state in which I now find myself.

Perhaps these are gifts from God. I am grateful for them, but I don't think they count as evidence. There is certainly no reason to believe that the Christian life will be peaceful and painless, and the lives of many great Christians have been characterised by pain, suffering, worry, starvation, torture, and death.

Perhaps I've been peaceful and happy because I've never put myself out to do the work I'm supposed to be doing.

Perhaps I'm healthy and prosperous because I've always put myself first, and not loved my neighbour as I should have done.

Perhaps the pattern in my life is simply the natural consequence of my always trying to make the best of any situation in which I find myself.

So I'd rather look elsewhere.

BETTER EVIDENCE.

It's better evidence for me, but useless to anyone else. I am sure that God has acted in my life, but it isn't reproducible - I can't repeat the experiment. I'm sure because things have happened which I know are beyond my capability, but I can't prove that either. I'll give two related examples.

MY LIFE HAS CHANGED. I've always been honest and law-abiding, if not always conventional, because it's seemed to be the sensible thing to do - why go looking for trouble ? I've been reasonably considerate of other people, provided that it wasn't too taxing. I've been ready to give to charities, and happy to go to church now and then. I didn't overdo the church bit, because I thought of myself as being pretty clever, really, and not in need of the same sort of stuff as the lowly masses. (I can make that sound much less crass if I try.) I enjoyed my job, and did more or less what I wanted.

I definitely didn't want to put myself out to do anything for anyone else. I had great admiration for dedicated people who rushed around organising Scout groups and choirs and meetings and so on, but absolutely no understanding of why they would want to do so. I would certainly not have stood up and talked to groups of people, outside a lecture room, under any circumstances.

Now I hope I'm a lot less arrogant, and significantly more use. It isn't for me to judge the results, but I can count the hours that go into things which are not primarily what I want to do to enjoy myself. I have not organised any Scout groups, but have done things with choirs and study groups and other things, all of which have significantly impaired my ability to spend time on fun and games. I am certainly a lot happier.

MY REASONS HAVE CHANGED. I'm still honest and law-abiding, and I hope no more conventional, but now I do things because I think that some of them, at least, are worth doing. I want to go to church because there is something there which I haven't found anywhere else. (There always was, but it used to be mildly embarrassing.)

I try to find out what will be worth doing. I pray and read the Bible every day, because it works. (I didn't say the Bible was useless.) I try to work out how, in practice, to love God and love my neighbour.

And I do things because I believe that they might help other people. I said I wouldn't have addressed groups of people. I can expand that; I would never, never, never have stood up in front of a group of people and said what I've been saying to you for weeks. (You might think that would be an improvement.)

I suspect that doesn't look very exciting. I told you it wouldn't be very convincing. There has been no Damascus road experience, no spectacular miracles, no stone tablets handed down from mountains.

But I suspect that I didn't need those. Instead, there has been a great deal of development and change, ministry from other Christians (often without their knowing), insights from reflections and experience, and other invisible changes which are evidence to me but hearsay to you.

As I noted earlier, though, many other Christians can say much the same. There is a pattern there, if you want to look for it.

WHAT ABOUT THE BIG THINGS ?

Traditionally, and in the insurance industry, "acts of God" covers floods, earthquakes, thunderbolts, storms, landslides, droughts, famines, volcanic eruptions, epidemics, threatening comets, and the prospect of the sun's supernova. He is also supposed to be involved in wars, the destinies of nations, and the like.

Such spectacle on a vast scale fits in with our notions of what God *ought* to be like. If God created the universe then He can mess it about any way He likes, and we'd quite like Him to do it. While He's at it, we'd quite like Him to sort out the Balkans, eliminate hunger, and a few other things. We want our God to be great and powerful and mighty, and to do wonderful things. We have always been enthusiastic about force and magic.

I know of no reason to insist that God can't do these things, but experience suggests that He doesn't. That's understandable. If He started managing the natural catastrophes, He'd get tangled with the evidence-and-faith argument. That doesn't mean that He can't, or even that He doesn't, but it does mean that I wouldn't expect that you could find any clear evidence of God's involvement.

Managing the people is a different question, but the answer might be quite similar. It seems not to be God's way to force people to do things; rather, we must choose to do them.

And that is consistent with a God who has built His universe on love, not power. Love is the antithesis of power; love has no power, but simply invites a response, which you can withhold if you so choose.

PRAYER ?

Prayer has been assumed in Christianity, and in Judaism before it, as a normal component of religion. It is still accepted as part of our relationship with God.

This raises all manner of questions. Does that mean we can change what God does by prayer ? If God (knowing what's going on far better than we can) has decided to do something, can we change His mind ?

DOES IT WORK ?

That might depend on what you mean by "work".

If you mean "Will God send me a new car if I ask Him for one ?", then it probably won't work. (It might - there are certainly cases where people who have prayed for a vehicle for use in Christian work have got one by surprising means.)

If you mean "Will God help me to control my life if I ask Him to do so ?", then my experience is that it might well work.

If you mean "Will God give me spiritual strength through prayer ?", then again my answer is that it might well work. It's a form of spiritual exercise.

If you mean "Will God heal me from this ailment if I ask Him to do so ?", then my answer is that it sometimes does work. It has not happened to me, but it has happened to my wife.

If your definition of "work" includes predictability, then it won't work. We get back to evidence-and-faith.

But if you think of God as wanting us to have faith but not hard evidence, the pattern seems to fit not badly. It is conceivable that God answers prayer quite directly in cases where the result is significantly to strengthen someone's faith.

MIRACLES ?

Why not ?

I don't want to pursue it because it requires another assumption - for example, you might assume that God made the universe. It's a big assumption, but it's a big topic.

You can't plead science as a "reason" why miracles can't happen. Science constitutionally can't see miracles - it deals only with reproducible phenomena. If a miracle happened in an experiment, you'd just reject that result and try again.

WORSHIP AND PRAISE.

All this is saying that God is in the world today, that He acts in the world, and does so in our real interests because He loves us.

In response, we do things to show our love for Him. (It makes no difference that we think He knows our love already.) Some of this is Christian work; another manifestation is our religious services of worship and praise.

Even if He does already know, we want to do something. What should we do ? What can we do for God ? (What can you give the man who has everything ?)

There are forms of service from the Quakers' total silence to multimedia events. They range from the glorious polyphonic settings of the Latin Mass to assemblies hard to distinguish (musically, at least) from rock concerts. Some have two or three people meeting for prayer; others have two or three thousand. There are evangelical services, charismatic services, children's services, special services for organisations of all sorts.

I like some of those forms of service, and would prefer not be involved in others. But I don't think it matters much; provided that you're there because you "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind", that will do.