

## THE SCIENCE OF FAITH



*Scripture:*

**Isaiah 55:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. <sup>2</sup>Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. <sup>3</sup>Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. <sup>4</sup>See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. <sup>5</sup>See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

<sup>6</sup>Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; <sup>7</sup>let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. <sup>8</sup>For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. <sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

**Psalms 63:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. <sup>2</sup>So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. <sup>3</sup>Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. <sup>4</sup>So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

<sup>5</sup>My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips <sup>6</sup>when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; <sup>7</sup>for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

<sup>8</sup>My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

<sup>9</sup>But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth.

**This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!**



**Let us pray: May the words of my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be good and pure and acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen**

Let's look at the physicality of faith described in this Psalm 63. This was written by King David, most likely while he was in the wilderness of Judah, fleeing from Absalom, his son, who was bent on taking over his father's reign. This is a psalm that shows his deep faith and total dependence on God as David says, "My soul thirsts for you,.... my flesh faints, for you,.... my lips praise you,.... I lift my hands and call your name,.... my soul clings to you and your right hand upholds me."

King David longs for consolation from God in a tangible biological way. He wrote this most

beautiful psalm that he probably sang out loud in a prayerful way to console himself for the predicament he was in, fleeing for his life from his own, at one time favorite, son.

Do you ever feel soulfully in need of God in a similar way? As if your body is hungry or thirsty for God? As if your soul is aching or your stomach is yearning to be filled with food for the soul?

Some Christian writers discuss how the soul is like a vessel that needs to be filled. They suggest that if we don't fill it with faith in God, we will feel incomplete and be searching for other ways to fill it.

## THE TWELVE STEP PROGRAM

Having worked with people with addictions, I learned that the Twelve Step Program was so important for recovery from alcohol and narcotics because it helps the addicted see that they are trying to fill their feelings of emptiness with drugs, or trying to numb that feeling with drugs.

When we don't have faith in God, our minds still yearn to have faith in something, so we fill that yearning with sex, drugs, and Rock n Roll! Sounds funny, but I am serious.

Sex addicts will tell you that they were looking for more than just the sex act; they were yearning for a sense of love and belonging from those they had sex with, but couldn't trust. Drug addicts, Grateful Dead-heads, and the 49er Faithful are all worshipping something, aren't they? Drug addicts live for the next fix; they worship their drug and feel they can't live without it. Some people shop to get that "high" from purchasing things, which temporarily lifts their spirits. Some people worship their jobs and cling to them for all their fulfillment. They often become workaholics.

Grateful Dead or other band groupies worship the bands they follow, sometimes to the point of losing their jobs or going in great debt traveling to follow the bands around and getting the best seats at their concerts.

### 49ER FAITHFUL

Even the 49er Faithful group has recently been promoted as a method for increasing their fan base. You can see by their video that their intention is to encourage people to worship the 49ers.

I have been a 49er fan since the early 80's. But look at how they now use spiritual inspiration to describe their followers who they call the "faithful" of the 49ers. (A 49er video was shown.)

Wow, could it be any more obvious that they are forming a religious-like 49er faith? They are using the universal human need to believe in something or someone to fill the void in our lives that faith in God is meant to fill. The marketer for the 49ers must have read the Time magazine article a few years ago that discussed the scientific studies about our genetic propensity for religious belief.

### THE GOD GENE

The article was titled, "*The God Gene*" after a book by Dean Hamer about *How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*. Hamer is a behavioral

geneticist at the National Institutes of Health and they stand by his research that shows spirituality is part of our human nature.

Hamer explains that spirituality is a sense or feeling of transcendence. He says the reason for hundreds of religions in the world is due to spirituality being part of our innate makeup. But the type of spirituality we practice is greatly influenced by where we live. And Hamer adds, "...Some people have a bit more capacity for faith than others, but it's present to some degree in everybody."

Dr. Hamer also looked at the increase in brain chemicals when people are in deep meditative states such as Zen practitioners and Roman Catholic nuns who pray for long periods of time each day. He said one gene, VMAT2, controls the chemical flow to the brain that relays emotions. He said there is more than one gene, but he focused on the functioning of this particular one to show how our genes predispose us to believe in something greater than ourselves.

Those who analyzed Hamer's findings think the notion of a universal genetic propensity towards things spiritual should generate a greater understanding among people of different faiths. It is clear that culture, history and environment determine whether one is a Christian, Hindu, Jew, Buddhist or Muslim. No matter what faith the innate spirituality causes one to develop, it can be enhanced through meditation, prayer, music, painting and worship.

**Dr Dean Hamer admits that he originally had trouble with religion when he became a scientist. But as he conducted the research for his book on *The God Gene*, he discovered personal meaning in his own intuitive sense of God's presence. He said, "We do not know God; we feel God."**

### A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

Considering a psychological approach to the science of faith, Carl Jung approached the idea of an inherent tendency to develop faith in the Divine by analyzing the development of the ego.

According to Carl Jung expert, Dr. Joyce Hudson, religion is a natural process. She believes the story of the ego is the story of human life with

God. She said the fact that the ego follows a natural course of development means that there is a natural process at the core of our religious life. Within the unconscious inner world of every human being there is the potential for human wholeness. This potential operates naturally, like an instinct, and seeks integration and fulfillment. In our own culture, Jesus is the most widely recognized image of wholeness. Yet there are many other forms found in nature that arise naturally from the unconscious that can be associated with Christ. She points out that flowers, especially the rose, are a natural symbol of wholeness in nature.

**Hudson goes on to explain:  
"What is religious is natural and  
understanding this natural process helps  
us see that God and nature are one."**

### **HOW OUR BRAINS ARE WIRED FOR BELIEF**

Neurobiologist, Dr. Andrew Newberg, agreed with this idea of faith developing naturally when he spoke at a Pew Forum on: *How Our Brains Are Wired for Belief*. He defined belief both biologically and psychologically as any perception, cognition, emotion, or memory that a person consciously or unconsciously assumes to be true.

Newberg conducted many brain studies at the University of Pennsylvania with a focus on how beliefs form physiologically. He asked the question: Why are religion and spirituality so ingrained in humans in every culture over all of time? One of the reasons he came up with is that neurons that fire together, wire together. Newberg found by looking at brain scans that the more you use a particular pathway of neurons, the stronger they become connected to each other. That is why regular prayer practice changes your brain and helps the pray-er feel more peaceful over time.

Newberg also asked the question: Why doesn't God go away? He concluded that religion and spirituality help humans maintain and transcend. Faith helps our mental health, our ability to cope with various issues and problems, and therefore it helps us maintain ourselves. It also provides a system that helps us transcend ourselves. Both science and religion help us better understand the totality of our universe and the ways in which we make sense of that universe through our belief systems.

### **DEVELOPING A FAITH**

Dr. Francis Collins, the Director of the National Institutes of Health, is an example of someone who learned to transcend himself and develop a faith in something greater despite growing up with atheist parents. It all started when Collins went to medical school and felt profoundly affected by observing how spirituality helped his patients cope with their illnesses.

He witnessed many cases where his patient's faith provided a strong reassurance of peace in this world or the next that helped them cope much better than his patients with no faith.

Dr. Collins admits in his book *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* that he was arrogant and willfully blind to all the evidence pointing him to God until suddenly one day he had a sensation of ice cracking under his feet.

He said it was a terrifying experience to realize he could no more rely on his atheistic position and was now going to be answerable to something bigger than himself. In defiance, he began to search out reasons to not believe in God. After reading about all the many religions of the world, he asked a friend for help. His friend suggested he read C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, since Lewis had become a Christian as an adult, too.

In the book, Lewis addressed the same objections to faith Dr. Collins pondered. Both Lewis and Collins tried to disprove faith in God based on logical argument. But the argument that connected most deeply for Dr. Collins was in the first chapter of *Mere Christianity* titled "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." Collins agreed with Lewis that moral law or the law of right behavior is a universal feature of human existence that we all apply when judging an action or making a decision. This sense of right and wrong is intrinsic in being human and it leads to altruistic behavior and causes us to admire people like Mother Teresa more than Rupert Murdoch. The Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is a basic universal tenet of moral law.

Francis Collins kept searching his way towards faith as he practiced as a young doctor but it took a giant leap forward when he participated in a medical mission trip to Nigeria. He reported that it was in Nigeria where he learned how to deal with his longing to feel close to God with prayer.

**He said, "Prayer is not an opportunity to manipulate God into doing what you want God to do. Prayer is a way of seeking fellowship with God, learning about God and attempting to perceive God's perspective on many issues around us that cause us distress or confusion, or wonder."**

As he kept searching to find a way closer to God he came to the realization that Jesus was his bridge to God. He said his new found faithfulness to God required of him a kind of death of self-will and a trust in Jesus. But first he had to research who Jesus was. So he read all of the New Testament accounts of Christ's life in detail. Despite having great admiration for other spiritual traditions, Collins surrendered his life to Jesus Christ when he was out hiking in the Cascade Mountains. He felt his search for the answer was over when he came upon a beautiful frozen waterfall hundreds of feet high. God spoke to him through this spectacle of nature and called him to trust and have faith.

Today, for Dr. Collins, Christianity provides the special ring of eternal truth. But he recommends that everyone conduct their own personal search for truth and faith.

## **NEUROTHEOLOGY**

So many scientists like Francis Collins and theologians have pondered the questions about why people have faith that a new field of inquiry has developed called Neurotheology. Neurotheology attempts to explain religious experience and behavior in neuro-scientific terms.

An article titled *Are We Hardwired for God?* credits the limbic system deep within the brain for emotion and faith. Rhawn Joseph, a prominent neurotheologian, says the limbic system is dotted with God neurons and God neurotransmitters.

The brain structures associated with religious belief are the hypothalamus, amygdala and the hippocampus.

Consistent changes in these areas can be detected by MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scans when the research subjects engage in religious meditations and prayer. Although some scientists challenge the idea that our brains are made for faith in God, the findings overwhelmingly point to our

brains being structured in a way that promotes responding to things spiritual or transcendent.

I think science has proven that our brains are hard-wired to seek spiritual connections and our genes facilitate an innate capacity for spirituality and compassion. I believe the marketing staff for the 49ers was very smart to inspire faith in their team as if they could fill that need we all have for something to believe in. However, after such a dismal season this year, many of the faithful have fled! 49er shirted people were cursing the 49ers as if they had been personally offended by their loss at a game I attended last Fall.

That is the trouble when we put faith in manmade things. They only temporarily fulfill our needs and when they disappoint us, we feel betrayed. The lesson from the 49er Faithful campaign should be to never put your faith in humans. Instead, put your faith in something that will never leave you or forsake you. Only faith in God can truly satisfy the thirst of your soul-longings. And I believe, like King David, that only God can protect you in the shadow of his wings, hold you fast, heal you and authentically steadfastly love you as your Creator and Redeemer. Amen

**Benediction: The whole book of Hebrews is a good one to read to understand what it means to have faith. Hebrews 12 says, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross.**

**And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen**



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