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**Using Pascal's Wager as a Model for Introducing God to Unbelievers in an Increasingly  
Fast-paced, Secular World.**

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## Introduction

Statistics say that each year, 4.5 billion people, or nearly 60% of the world's population, will gamble at least once. Every time someone gambles in a casino, the statistical probability—that is, 'the odds'—favor the house. With odds stacked against the individual gambler, it appears irrational to gamble in casinos and one must wonder why anyone would take such risks. Conversely, gambling would appear rational if the odds were not stacked against the gambler. What if the odds were significantly higher; 50/50 to be exact? If this were the case, more people would be spending more time and money at casinos with such odds.

Now consider an opportunity to place a bet with odds greater than 50/50, and winnings worth far more than money alone. Pascal's Wager does just that. It poses a simple question to unbelievers, asking them whether they believe in God or not, insisting they must choose. Michael Rota asserts that it is both rational and moral for unbelievers to "bet" on God and live a Christian life because there is much to gain and relatively little to lose.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, when faced with the decision between two options: belief or unbelief in God, Pascal claims the benefits of choosing God and winning far outweigh the benefits of choosing against Him and winning. Moreover, the loss involved in choosing God and losing is insignificant compared to the loss of choosing against Him and losing. Unlike gambling with money, this bet involves a person's life. This bet's payoff is far greater than anything money can buy. Pascal believes that if a person bets on God, the potential windfall is eternal, with benefits unlike anything on this earth.

In an increasingly post-Christian world with limited attention-spans, it is becoming increasingly imperative to establish a quick and effective way to engage in conversations about God with unbelievers. Accordingly, this thesis examines Pascal's Wager as a quick, simple, and

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence and the Abundant Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016) 12.

unobtrusive method for planting a seed in the minds of unbelievers and encouraging them to consider the reality of God by putting the power of prayer to the test—where the benefit and reward of experiencing an answer to prayer far outweighs the risk.

## Chapter 1: Pascal's Wager – A Comprehensive Examination

This chapter will examine Blaise Pascal's philosophical wager which was developed to spur his audience into thinking about the possibility of an infinite God and then place a bet on whether He exists. The research presented herein provides an examination of the Wager and investigates its pressing urgency. Pascal's Wager hinges on the idea that the utility of theistic belief, if true, is infinite; thus, the expected utility of theism overpowers that of any of its rivals.<sup>2</sup>

Pascal's Wager was the first to introduce an argument for believing in God in simple gambling terms as he proposes the following:

Either God is, or He is not. But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.<sup>3</sup>

Given that reason alone cannot determine whether God exists, Pascal concludes that this question can only be resolved by a "coin toss." However, even if one does not know the outcome of this coin toss, one must base one's bet on some expectation about the consequence. One must decide whether to live as though God exists, or live as though God does not exist, even though one may be mistaken in either case. Simply by being alive, a person is already committed to one path or the other and thus a person cannot choose whether to play because to refuse to participate is simply to place one's bet against God. Therefore, a person cannot avoid the risk, nor refuse to play, for everyone is already in the game as Pascal stated, everyone must wager; it is not optional.

For a person to believe in some type of meaning and purpose in this life, one must make a choice. This choice, according to Pascal, includes the question of God, and is even more

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<sup>2</sup>Jeff Jordan, "Pascal's Wager Revisited," *Religious Studies*, 34, no. 4 (1998): 419.

<sup>3</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York, NY: Open Road Integrated Media Inc., 2011), 77.

fundamentally expressed in relation to God (to that which exists beyond the finite world), and that which the finite world is dependent on for its own existence. In other words, to ask why humanity exists implies that there is some reason or purpose for our existence. He believes people must bet because to be anything at all, they must rise above the “nothing” since they cannot exist by their own efforts. To do otherwise, for Pascal, is to not live up to what life is, to neglect its full potential, meaning and purpose, and thus be unreasonable.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a person must wager either that there is something beyond this finite life which guarantees ultimate happiness (God), or that there is not.

Pascal asks his reader to analyze the position of humankind, where people’s actions can be hugely consequential, but their understanding of these consequences is flawed. Pascal specifically points out several distinct areas where there is uncertainty in human life: in purpose (#72), in reason (#272), in science (#294), in religion (#229 and 565), and in skepticism (#387). Merely by existing in a state of uncertainty, humanity is forced to choose between the available courses of action for practical purposes.

Pascal affirms that no one can know God or what He is like, nor can a person use reason by analogy to believe in or know God since there is no adequate analogue. He describes humans as finite beings trapped within an incomprehensible infinity and this finitude constrains a person’s ability to achieve truth reliably. He states that “we know the existence and nature of the finite, because we also are finite and are extended in space. We know the existence of the infinite, and are ignorant of its nature, because it has extension like us, but not limits like us. But we know neither the existence nor the nature of God because he has neither extension nor

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<sup>4</sup>Joel Hodge, “Pascal's Wager Today: Belief and the Gift of Existence,” *New Blackfriars*. 95, no. 1060 (2014): 698.

limits.”<sup>5</sup> As a mathematician, Pascal uses mathematics to compare God to the man-made concept of infinity. People understand and accept the possibility of an infinite number, which is unlike any other number since it is known to have extension and length. However, since infinity does not have a limit, the true nature of infinity remains unknown. In the same way, he adds, it is impossible to know God since He does not exist in dimensional space the way humans do. While infinity has a length, God exists outside of dimensionality and thus has neither length nor breadth.<sup>6</sup> Although limited in dimensionality as finite beings, people, including scientists still believe it exists even though we are unable to “see” infinity. Pascal maintains this same principle should also apply to belief in God since we know He exists even though we are unable to “see” Him. Christians believe, Pascal says, not because they have been given proof; rather, faith transcends evidence. While people can discern a great deal through reason, they are ultimately forced to gamble since he believes, faith based on reason would negate the inexpressible and incomprehensible holy attributes of God which Christians acknowledge in faith.<sup>7</sup> Faith for Pascal is beyond reason and is the motivation behind his Wager argument.

His wager seeks to clarify the context of finite life by juxtaposing it to the (not simply “an”) infinite being. Infinity, he argues, is fundamental for living a finite life. Infinity is the source and end of finite life which is, Pascal emphasizes, “endowed with the immortality of the soul, even and especially finite life that has gone astray in idolatry, evil and distorted desire.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, what is being imagined when one speaks of God is a context for one’s finite life—a

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<sup>5</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, 77.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Hodge, “Pascal’s Wager Today,” 698.

context that makes sense of the origin, meaning and purpose of one's existence<sup>9</sup>; of "why there is anything rather than nothing."<sup>10</sup> In other words, when all of the scientific questions have been exhausted, people still need to come to terms with the reality of a finite life and why they exist at all. As Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked, "To believe in God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning."<sup>11</sup>

Pascal then weighs the options as he assesses a person's gain and loss with his wager as he establishes three pairs of values. First he says, "You have two things to lose, the true and the good."<sup>12</sup> He explains that either option could lose the "true" by being wrong, but only one option can lose the good; he believes the only good is God and, moreover, to choose God is to choose the true. Additionally, Pascal says, there are "two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness."<sup>13</sup> Pascal appears to be grouping will and happiness as one pair and reason and knowledge as the other. If so, this appeals to the Aristotelian understanding and the tension between reason and will. A person's happiness is closely linked with one's will. Reason is anchored in knowledge since a person cannot reason about things which one does not know. Therefore, human reason can only make a choice after weighing the gains and losses in believing or not believing in the existence of God. In the final pairing, according to Pascal, "your

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<sup>9</sup>Hodge, "Pascal's Wager Today," 698.

<sup>10</sup>Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1987), 11.

<sup>11</sup>G. E. M. Anscombe, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Notebooks 1914-1916* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 74.

<sup>12</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, 77.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.



nature has two things to avoid, error and wretchedness.”<sup>14</sup> This statement highlights human nature which seeks to avoid error and secure its own happiness and comforts.

Given the fallen human condition, D. Groothuis posits that pride tends to filter out what would humble us, especially knowledge of a morally impeccable deity before whom one is exhaustively accountable and without excuse.<sup>15</sup> This may, in fact, be what Pascal meant when he said that after wagering, those wagering “will recognize that they have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which they have given nothing.”<sup>16</sup> The will is the main component of belief, not because it creates belief, but because things are true or false according to the aspects by which they are judged. When the will likes one aspect more than another, it prohibits the mind from considering the qualities of the one for which it does not care.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the mind continuously looks at the aspect preferred by the will, and then a decision is based on what it observes and what appears most favorable.

There is a great mystery hidden within Pascal’s Wager associated with belief in God, especially since humanity is not responsible for its existence. No one has ever caused one’s life “to be” and not one person has any real control over one’s existence. Questions about existence and the universe which lead to discussions about God are more radical than any other questions because, as Wittgenstein says, “Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystery.”<sup>18</sup> Herbert McCabe calls the question of why something exists rather than nothing, the ‘God-question’

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<sup>14</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, 77.

<sup>15</sup>D. Groothuis, “Wagering Belief: Examining Two Objections to Pascal’s Wager,” *Cambridge University Press*. 30, (1994): 481.

<sup>16</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, 77.

<sup>17</sup>Groothuis, “Wagering Belief,” 481.

<sup>18</sup>Anscombe, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 74.

because “whatever the answer is, people call it God.”<sup>19</sup> According to McCabe, a genuine atheist does not recognize the mystery in existence and refuses to ask the God-question. He considers discussions regarding the existence of God to be part of “radical questioning,”<sup>20</sup> which is merely an aspect of ordinary intellectual activity. Seeking to prove the existence of God, he claims, is like proving the validity of certain questions which are posed by the existence of the universe. The contemplation of these questions arises from one’s natural curiosity about one’s own existence and desire to contemplate this existence. McCabe argues that the radical questioning of the universe is often discouraged by societies that believe they have all the answers, such as those who believe science will answer all questions.<sup>21</sup> Yet humanity is constantly riddled by “why” they exist. Children ask the question of “why” constantly in different ways while adolescents and adults, both young and old, continuously struggle to make sense of their own lives. Many will ask “why” in response to life’s daily struggles as well when they are faced with their own mortality. In a genuine search for answers and truth in the midst of mystery, Hodge maintains, God emerges.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>McCabe, *God Matters*, 22.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>22</sup>Hodge, “Pascal’s Wager Today,” 698.

## Chapter 2: Why Choose God?

As far as Pascal is concerned, the question should be, why would anyone not bet on God? Hence, this chapter will compare the potential gains and losses of betting for and against God and investigate Pascal's claim that it would be more advantageous for unbelievers to bet on God. Reason alone, Pascal thinks, cannot settle the question whether to bet on God, but prudential considerations can. He says, "But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is."<sup>23</sup> His argument can be summed up in this way: if one believes in God and God exists, one gains infinite bliss after death. If one believes in God and God does not exist, one loses very little. However, if one does not believe in God, and God does exist, one receives infinite torment in Hell after death.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, if God does not exist and one does not believe in Him, little is gained. In other words, one has infinity to gain and little to lose by believing, and infinity to lose and little to gain by not believing.<sup>25</sup>

Pascal's wording implies a lopsided bet where a person can only win, for as he clearly states, if you lose, you lose nothing. Even though the two options are unequal, nothing is lost in choosing wrongly as long as one bets on God. Pascal sees choosing God as having no drawbacks. Even if unbelievers doubt it, Pascal believes the prospect of infinite reward, especially in contrast to insignificant loss, is compelling and thus ought to lead to one betting accordingly, even if nothing else was in one's favor. Therefore, his wager can be simply summed

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<sup>23</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, 77.

<sup>24</sup>Michael L. Martin, "Pascal's Wager as an Argument for not Believing in God," *Religious Studies* 19, no. 1 (1983): 61.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

up: If you bet on God and lose, you lose nothing; if you bet against God and lose, you lose everything.

Pascal clearly believes a person should be willing to risk the finite to gain what is infinite. The risk of betting against God (that is, what you lose if you make the bet and are wrong) is infinite (eternal punishment), and the payoff of betting against God (that is, what you gain if you make the bet and win) is finite. Therefore, since a bet on God has infinite value, Pascal is convinced that this alone should be reason enough to choose God and would be the better bet.

Although Pascal gives good reason for betting on God, his reasons do not make God's existence more likely. Rather, his argument focuses on the benefit of betting on God. Almost all evidential reasons for not believing in God are presumably outweighed by beneficial reasons for believing in God.<sup>26</sup> Pascal thinks the evidence for betting against God is, at best, inconclusive. Thus, the Wager argument becomes effective since evidence alone cannot answer the question.

Although one must choose what to believe, one cannot do so based on evidence or pure reason. Peter Bernstein, a historian of probability, supports Pascal and believes life is about dealing with problems for which there is no certain solution and where rational decisions based on reason alone are almost impossible to make.<sup>27</sup> Reason alone, he states, cannot settle the issue to believe in God. However, dominance reasoning can be used to weigh the options in order to make the most rational choice when the choice to bet on God dominates the choice to bet against God.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Martin, "Pascal's Wager," 61.

<sup>27</sup>Peter L. Bernstein, "Facing The Consequences," *Business Economics* 35 (2000): 9.

<sup>28</sup>John Cantwell, "The Logic of Dominance Reasoning," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 35, no. 1 (2006): 41.

Pascal's Wager employs modern decision theory as he proposes the Wager in terms of outcomes; rather than just probability. His Wager was the first serious contribution to this decision theory as it examines the calculated risks involved—with one choosing how to proceed in uncertain situations while weighing probabilities against risks and rewards.<sup>29</sup> The Wager is a practical approach to belief as it appeals to self-interest and the reduction of personal risk. The opening phrase “infini-rien”—“infinite nothing”—describes Pascal's view of the human condition. Even in the seventeenth century, Pascal was aware of the pressing problem of people knowing too much about the world and too little about themselves. He made his bet with a certain distrust of his own rationality, a strong passion to believe, and a conviction about how knowledge and doubt are to be balanced. People have both mathematical knowledge and knowledge—albeit faint knowledge surrounded by darkness—of their own condition as moral agents; if they truly believed they knew nothing at all, they risk resigning themselves to nothingness.<sup>30</sup> Pascal believes everyone must bet because, to be anything at all, one must rise above nothingness, and we cannot do this through our own efforts.

Pascal's Wager does not guarantee Christian conversion and eternal heavenly bliss. However, when placed in the context of an existential consideration of the nature of human life, the Wager bears fruit.<sup>31</sup> Pascal is not trying to “prove,” or “convince” unbelievers of the existence of God. His Wager is not an end; it is rather a beginning, a starting point to highlight the inadequacy of arguments to prove or disprove God's existence in order to encourage

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<sup>29</sup>Frank A. Chimenti, “Pascal's Wager: A Decision-Theoretic Approach,” *Mathematics Magazine* 63, no. 5 (1990): 321.

<sup>30</sup>Armour, *Infini Rien*, 2-3.

<sup>31</sup>Hodge, “Pascal's Wager,” 698.

unbelievers to righteous living as an aid to attaining faith—thereby lessening the stumbling blocks of their sins.

Betting on God is neither a one-time event nor a half-hearted choice. As Alan Hajek states, wagering on God is an ongoing action that continues until death and involves adopting a certain set of practices and living a life that fosters constant and continuous belief in God.<sup>32</sup> Jeff Jordan, one of the most prolific defenders of the Wager, asserts that to wager for God is “to commit to God” in a wholehearted way that reorients one’s goals, values, and behavior by including the proposition that God exists among one’s most basic values and beliefs.<sup>33</sup> In the modern context, Pascal’s Wager emphasizes the need for critical and meaningful existential commitments, particularly as one faces death. Discussion of meaning, commitment and contingency may provide avenues for our postmodern culture to contemplate finitude in the context of receiving the greatest possible relationship and gift.<sup>34</sup> Finitude, combined with reason, is why humans cry out to God in times of pain, loneliness, or misfortune. Such experiences make us aware of our finiteness and how dependent we are on factors greater than ourselves. Without negating one’s freedom, this recognition of finiteness can ultimately move beyond momentary or chance experiences to the deepest level of being—to the recognition of the essential giftedness of existence, which gives rise to relational identity and the need for the other to nurture this identity in love.<sup>35</sup> When properly contextualized, the Wager reminds us to seriously address our need for meaningful commitments, loving relationships, and confronting our mortality. Rather than focusing on winning and losing in the afterlife, the Wager in a modern context highlights how

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<sup>32</sup>Alan Hájek, “Waging War on Pascal’s Wager,” *The Philosophical Review*. 112, no. 1 (2003): 28.

<sup>33</sup>Jordan, “Pascal’s Wager,” 422.

<sup>34</sup>Hodge, “Pascal’s Wager,” 698.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 699.

human life is structured according to meaning, giftedness, and relationality.<sup>36</sup> Pascal invites us to place our faith in the existence of God because he believes life leads to the possibilities of infinite love embedded in existence itself and for which everyone deeply yearns. To wager on God means recognizing the possibility that people have been given the gift of existence by someone greater than themselves, for a purpose. To wager against God means giving up this possibility and losing sight of the potential gift of a loving relationship between humans and their creator.

The Christian God, Pascal maintains, offers infinite happiness to those who choose to believe, follow, and practice His ways; for those who fail to believe, practice, and follow, infinite suffering is the consequence. Moreover, whatever costs one incurs in this life for following and practicing Christian beliefs, assuming there is a non-zero probability that God does exist, it nonetheless remains rational to bet on God based on prudential grounds even in the absence of compelling evidence and arguments for God's existence.<sup>37</sup> Pascal was no mere theist; he was a committed Christian trying to help people not only know God but also to love Christ. As Pascal asserts, one cannot know God at all apart from Christ (#449). But how, then, does one come to know Christ? One can only know Him through Scripture (#417), and orthodox belief and membership in the Church (#733).<sup>38</sup> These ideas are at the core of what concerned Pascal and are critical to understanding him.

Overall, if there were a wager which gave a person an equal chance of gaining two or more lifetimes of happiness or gaining nothing, then one would be a fool to bet on the latter. In

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<sup>36</sup>Hodge, "Pascal's Wager," 699.

<sup>37</sup>Bradley Armour-Garb, "Betting on God," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 120.

<sup>38</sup>Christopher Beiting, "A Bad Bet." Review of *Pascal's Wager: The Man Who Played Dice With God*, edited by James. A. Connor. Books in Review (2008): 44.

the same way, Pascal argues, it would be unreasonable to bet against an *eternal* life of happiness for the possibility of gaining nothing. The more rational decision is, therefore, to wager that God *does* exist, since “If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.” One can gain *eternal* life if God exists; and if not, one will be no worse off in death than if one had not believed.<sup>39</sup> However, if you bet against God, win or lose, you either gain nothing or lose everything. You are either unavoidably annihilated (in which case, nothing matters one way or the other) or miss an opportunity for eternal happiness.

Leslie Armour sums it up by saying that any action, including the Wager, would be good if the goodness of the world would be improved by it; betting on God thus constitutes a moral—as well as rational—act.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, Pascal maintains, if people acted and behaved as if God exists, there would be less immoral behavior, causing the world to be a better place. By and large, Pascal’s Wager is believed to be good because it is intrinsically morally good and thus good for everyone.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Beiting, “A Bad Bet,” 44.

<sup>40</sup>Armour, *Infini Rien*, 2-3.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.



### Chapter 3: Critical Analysis of Pascal's Wager

Pascal's Wager is one of the more interesting arguments in the philosophy of religion. The argument is short and snappy, and it sidesteps the long and involved messiness of proofs for the existence of God by grounding belief in God with prudential or beneficial considerations. To believe in God, says the Wager, is the smartest thing.<sup>42</sup> However, the Wager has been regularly criticized and attacked on many grounds and this chapter will examine the common historical and modern criticisms.

#### Historical Critical Response

The French scholar and mathematician Pierre Simon de Laplace was one of the first to mock Pascal's Wager and the use of probability in theology. He believed it was not worth making a bet for the sake of profit. Moreover, Laplace asserts that the more the offeror promises, the lower should be the probability ascribed to the offeror's promise being true. Since God promises infinite utility, the probability of His promise of His existence being true should be zero.<sup>43</sup> However, Laplace's "inverse probability" argument is vacuous unless it is taken as a rule of thumb for avoiding crooks. One would not want to be committed to the proposition that gods who promise little exist with high probability, but this is implied by Laplace's argument.<sup>44</sup>

Nearly a generation after Pascal, a prominent French writer of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, rejected the idea that the Wager was "proof of God." He mocked it as being "indecent and childish," adding, "the interest I have to believe a thing is no proof that such a thing

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<sup>42</sup>Robert Anderson, "Recent Criticisms and Defenses of Pascal's Wager," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37, (1995): 45.

<sup>43</sup>Anthony Duff, "Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities," *Analysis*, 46 (1986), 107.

<sup>44</sup>Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 154.

exists.”<sup>45</sup> Voltaire suggests that Pascal’s Wager, and his appeal to self-interest, are unworthy of the gravity of theistic belief. However, Pascal’s mission was not to advance the Wager as proof of God’s existence, but rather as a necessary pragmatic decision which is “impossible to avoid” for any living person. He argued that abstaining from making a wager is not an option and that “reason is incapable of divining the truth,” thus, a decision of whether to believe in the existence of God must be made by “considering the consequences of each possibility.”<sup>46</sup> Voltaire claims that Pascal’s argument was not convincing and states that no matter how far someone is tempted with rewards to believe in Christian salvation, the result will be at best a faint belief.<sup>47</sup> As if he knew in advance that this objection would be broached, Pascal, in his *Pensées*, stated that some cannot believe.

Another popular objection states that a person cannot come to believe anything because of wanting to do so. This philosophical view, known as doxastic voluntarism, describes people who can choose to believe at will,<sup>48</sup> or those who have voluntary control over their beliefs. Voltaire does not even believe one could come to believe in God through having *perfect evidence*, let alone through a desire to believe.<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, Pascal believes faith is a free and undeserved gift from God. According to him, what the Wager motivates is not belief, but action, “saying masses and the rest,” which will then dispose the seeker to receive God’s grace.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Will Durant and Ariel Durant. *The Age of Voltaire*. (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 362.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 370.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Jeff Jordan, *Pascal’s Wager: Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>49</sup>James Franklin, “Two Caricatures, I: Pascal’s Wager,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44, no. 5 (1998): 110.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

The French philosopher Etienne Souriau stated the Wager is foolish since the bettor needs to be certain that God intends to honor the bet while there is no proof that He will.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, he asserts, there is no guarantee that God would even accept the bet. In his *L'ombre de Dieu*, Souriau maintains the greatest failure can be found in the construction of the Wager. If God gives infinite bliss to the believer and refuses it to the non-believer, it must be in virtue of a promise which functions as a pact.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, if God does not exist, one must wonder with whom did the bettor engage in the Wager since a wager implies two parties: one who proposes it and the other who accepts it. A wager would therefore be invalid if one of the parties does not agree to take it up. In the case of Pascal's Wager, Souriau believes there is uncertainty about one side of the Wager. It is possible that God does not exist, making the Wager meaningless. Nonetheless, Pascal's Wager continues to stand strong even against the criticisms of Souriau since there is still a possibility that God does exist.

### Modern Critical Response

The many gods objection is the most frequently employed (both historically and today) against Pascal's Wager. In 1762, a French philosopher named Denis Diderot wrote, "Pascal has said that if your religion is false, you have risked nothing by believing it true; if it is true, you have risked all by believing it false. An Imam could have said as much."<sup>53</sup> This statement exposes a serious question as to which god Pascal is referring to in his Wager. Voltaire similarly

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<sup>51</sup>Aline Wiame, "Cinema as an Ethics Modes of Existence: Pascal's Wager and Rohmer's *My Night at Maud's*," University of Brussels, 2013, [https://www.academia.edu/9489753/Cinema\\_as\\_an\\_Ethics\\_of\\_Modes\\_of\\_Existence\\_Pascal\\_s\\_Wager\\_and\\_Rohmer\\_s\\_My\\_Night\\_at\\_Maud\\_s](https://www.academia.edu/9489753/Cinema_as_an_Ethics_of_Modes_of_Existence_Pascal_s_Wager_and_Rohmer_s_My_Night_at_Maud_s)

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Pascal's Wager about God," May 2020. <https://iep.utm.edu/pasc-wag/>

criticized the Wager, maintaining Pascal was not covering all the relevant possibilities and that there were a “hundred religions in England, all of which damn you if you believe in your dogmas, which they call absurd and impious.”<sup>54</sup> More recently, Antony Flew writes, “the central and fatal weakness of this argument is that Pascal assumes, and has to assume, that there are only two betting options.”<sup>55</sup> Possible religious hypotheses include not just the existence of the Christian God, but also the Islamic God, and the god of the Druids, and even the deity, if such should exist, who would grant eternal life to any number of incompatible god-possibilities, each one condemning the devotees of every other deity to perdition.<sup>56</sup>

Since there have been many religions throughout history, and therefore many conceptions of God (or gods), some assert that all of them need to be factored into the Wager, in an argumentation known as the argument from inconsistent revelations.<sup>57</sup> This, its proponents argue, would lead to a high probability of believing in “the wrong god”, which, they claim, eliminates the mathematical advantage Pascal claimed with his wager. J. L. Mackie notes that “the church within which salvation is to be found is not necessarily the Church of Rome, but perhaps that of the Anabaptists or the Mormons or the Muslim Sunnis or the worshipers of Kali or of Odin.”<sup>58</sup> However, this objection fails, since most religions do not say that belief in their particular god

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<sup>54</sup>Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. T. Besterman (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1971), 280.

<sup>55</sup>Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (London, UK: Elek Books Ltd, 1976), 66.

<sup>56</sup>Jeff Jordan, “The Many-Gods Objection and Pascal’s Wager,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 31, no. 3, (1991): 309.

<sup>57</sup>Daniel Podgorski, “A Logical Infinite: The Constrained Probabilistic Definitions of Chance and Infinity in Blaise Pascal’s Famous Wager,” *The Gemsbok*, December 18, 2015, <https://thegemsbok.com/art-reviews-and-articles/friday-phil-pascals-wager/>.

<sup>58</sup>J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 203.

awards infinite happiness and eternal bliss. Therefore, the semi-blissful promises such as Kali's or Odin's drop out of consideration.

Authors argue that in the competition among various possible deities for one's belief, some are more probable than others. Although there may be ties among the expected utilities—all infinite—for believing in various ones, their individual probabilities can be used as tie-breakers. George Schlesinger offers this principle: “In cases where the mathematical expectations are infinite, the criterion for choosing the outcome to bet on is its probability.”<sup>59</sup> There must be reasons, then, for assigning higher probability to some Gods than others. Jordan suggests that some outlandish theistic hypotheses may be dismissed for having “no backing of tradition.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Schlesinger maintains that Pascal is addressing readers who “have a notion of what genuine religion is about.”<sup>61</sup> Lycan and Schlesinger give more theoretical reasons for favoring Pascal's God over others. They argue that simplicity considerations favor a conception of God as “absolutely perfect,” which is theologically unique in that it implies all the other predicates traditionally ascribed to God and we may add that this conception is Pascal's.<sup>62</sup> Conceptions of rival gods, by contrast, leave open various questions about their nature, the answering of which would detract from their simplicity, and thus their probability.

Why is Pascal sure that the Christian God is the only god when it is quite possible that a person who is Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., could think of his or her own religious god when hearing his wager? Since the essence of the many-gods objection is that there are simply too

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<sup>59</sup>George Schlesinger, “A Central Theistic Argument,” in *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager*, ed. Jeff Jordan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 84.

<sup>60</sup>Jordan, “The Many-Gods,” 314.

<sup>61</sup>William G. Lycan and George N. Schlesinger, “You Bet Your Life: Pascal's Wager Defended.” *Contemporary perspectives on religious epistemology*, (1988): 282.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

many deities from whom to choose, it does appear that this objection might pose a problem for his Wager. However, as far as Pascal is concerned, his *Pensées* is rooted in his own Christian faith and there is no question as to which God Pascal is referring to within his wager. Rota correctly points out that “nothing in this objection challenges the conclusion that it is better to commit to God in a Christian way than not be religious at all.”<sup>63</sup> Jordan argues that belief in God is not enough, you have to believe in the right god to get the rewards.<sup>64</sup>

Pascal says that the unbelievers who rest within the many-gods objection have fallen into a fatal repose. If they were truly interested in knowing the truth, they would be persuaded to examine whether Christianity is like any other religion, but they just cannot be bothered.<sup>65</sup> Their objection might be sufficient were the subject concerned merely some “question in philosophy,” but not “here, where everything is at stake.” In “a matter where they themselves, their eternity, their all are concerned” (#226), they can manage no better than “a superficial reflection.”<sup>66</sup> However, if those who raised this objection were sincere, they would want to examine the matter in detail.

David Wetsel notes Pascal's abrupt treatment of the pagan religions: “As far as Pascal is concerned, the demise of the pagan religions of antiquity speaks for itself.”<sup>67</sup> Those pagan religions which still exist in the New World, in India, and in Africa are not even worth a second glance.” They are obviously the work of superstition and ignorance and have nothing in them

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<sup>63</sup>Rota, *Taking Pascal's Wager*, 67.

<sup>64</sup>Jordan, “The Many-Gods,” 312.

<sup>65</sup>David Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief: Catechesis and Conversion in the Pensées* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 370.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 370.

which might interest ‘les gens habiles’ (‘clever men’)<sup>68</sup> (# 251). Islam warrants more attention, being distinguished from paganism by its claim to be a revealed religion. Nevertheless, Pascal concludes that the religion founded by Mohammed can on several counts be shown to be devoid of divine authority, and therefore that, as a path to the knowledge of God, it is as much a dead end as paganism.<sup>69</sup>

Ecumenical interpretations of the Wager argue that believing in a generic god, or a god by the wrong name, is acceptable so long as that conception of God has similar essential characteristics to the God considered in Pascal's Wager. Proponents of this line of reasoning suggest that either all the conceptions of God or gods throughout history boil down to just a small set of genuine options, or that if Pascal's Wager can simply bring a person to believe in “generic theism,” it has done its job.<sup>70</sup> However, Pascal argues for the uniqueness of Christianity in the Wager itself, writing: “If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible. Who then can blame the Christians for not being able to give reasons for their beliefs, professing as they do a religion which they cannot explain by reason” (#343)?

Modern critics also argue that Pascal's Wager suggests feigning belief to attain an eternal reward. This argument from inauthentic belief is a so-called “fake it till you make it” attempt at faith. Richard Dawkins argues that “this would be dishonest and immoral, and it is absurd to think that God, being just and omniscient, would not see through this deceptive strategy on the part of the ‘believer,’”<sup>71</sup> thus nullifying the benefits of the wager. Pascal, far from suggesting that God can be deceived by outward show, already knows that “God looks only at what is inward”

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<sup>68</sup>Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief*, 181.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 182.

<sup>70</sup>Paul Saka, “Pascal's Wager and the Many Gods Objection,” *Religious Studies*, 37, no. 3 (2001): 340.

<sup>71</sup>Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: First Mariner Books, 2008), 130-132.

(#904). Christians and Jews know this to be true based on the scripture in 1 Samuel 16:7, “For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”<sup>72</sup>

Within his *Pensées*, Pascal offers advice to the person who has chosen to bet on the existence of God but is unable to put his heart into the belief. Pascal argues that if the wager is valid, the inability to believe is irrational and due to worldly passions and sin:

Your inability to believe, because reason compels you to [believe] and yet you cannot, [comes] from your passions. This inability, therefore, can be overcome by diminishing these irrational sentiments: Learn from those who were bound like you. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe and deaden your acuteness. But this is what I am afraid of. And why? What have you to lose (#233)?

Pascal held to a Jansenist theology regarding humanity’s wretchedness and inability to choose God on its own—and belief in God alone was insufficient to attain salvation. As the Bible tells us in James 2:19, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” Salvation requires “faith” not just in the sense of belief, but of trust and obedience. Pascal’s doctrine of salvation was based on faith over works since Pascal’s position was that true “saving” belief in God requires more than logical assent, accepting the Wager is only a first step.

Overall, Pascal acknowledges that one cannot force oneself to believe, yet because one is rationally compelled to believe by the Wager, one should “fake it till you make it.”<sup>73</sup> He then offered advice on what steps one can take to arrive at belief by advising his interlocutor to go to church, pray, and to follow the lead of other Christians, no matter how meaningless these

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<sup>72</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>73</sup>Tyler Dalton McNabb and Michael R. Devito, “Blaise Pascal: Wagering the Truthfulness of Christianity,” in *The History of Apologetics*, ed. Benjamin K. Forrest, Joshua D. Chatraw, and Alister E. McGrath (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 321.



activities seem, because by doing these things, one increases one's chances of coming to a genuine belief in God.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, "no one needs to be a doxastic voluntarist since the Wager neither entails nor assumes that belief is under our direct control."<sup>75</sup> Rather, Pascal argued that the compelling force of the Wager should motivate one to live for God despite one's beliefs, in hope that eventually God would open one's heart and mind to His truth and one would believe.

Pascal's goal is to convince his audience that it is prudent to bet on God's existence. However, mathematician and philosopher W. K Clifford challenges the basic idea of letting prudential reasoning, rather than evidence, influence what one believes. Clifford asserts, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."<sup>76</sup> He asserts that it would be careless and potentially harmful for a person or group to believe in anything without sufficient evidence. The danger of this is a society that is too trusting and too gullible. Therefore, he believes it is important to continue inquiring and testing.<sup>77</sup>

However, Pascal's prudential approach to the question of theism cannot be disregarded. Whether one will be convinced by a particular prudential argument depends on one's epistemological attitude. Some people are susceptible to prudential arguments while others have epistemological views that make them immune to such arguments. An important factor determining the success of a prudential argument is its intrinsic quality based on a highly probable and advantageous outcome.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>McNabb and Devito, "Blaise Pascal," 321.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Timothy J. Madigan, *W. K. Clifford and the Ethics of Belief*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 61.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>78</sup>Erik Weber, "Prudential Arguments in the Realism Debate," *Peeters Publishers* 41, no. 164, (1998): 303.

Erik Weber explains that the calculation of expected utilities can influence our beliefs and is a necessary condition for prudential arguments to be convincing. He uses the example of being an atheist in a religious country where atheism is a capital offense—thereby causing one to act as if one were a believer. In a case like this, calculations of expected utilities would certainly influence one’s actions. However, this is not always the case since a person may be merely pretending to believe. In Pascal's argument, we can assume that God can read our minds, and therefore can distinguish true believers from ersatz ones. Under this condition, the calculations about expected utility may convince some people to believe that God exists.

Jordan argues that we may legitimately ignore theological hypotheses that are “maximally implausible,” even if they are logically possible. He then draws his account of maximal implausibility from the difference in epistemic merit between those hypotheses that “enjoy the backing of a living tradition” and those that do not. Jordan believes these claims allow for a defense of an “ecumenical” version of the Wager, a defense that establishes the prudential superiority of traditional theism over atheism.<sup>79</sup> Jordan argues, “The wager is not an argument for the claim that God exists, but rather an argument for the claim that a belief in God is pragmatically rational and that inducing a belief in God is the response dictated by prudence. Pascal’s concern then, is not with the truth of theistic belief so much as it is with the rationality of belief.”<sup>80</sup>

Schlesinger argues that the principle of sufficient reason gives some support for believing in God, and he agrees that *any* reasoning that gets us to believe in God, if God exists, cannot be

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<sup>79</sup>Lawrence Pasternack, “The Many Gods Objection to Pascal's Wager: A Decision Theoretic Response.” *Journal of Philosophy* 15, no.2, (2012): 161.

<sup>80</sup>Jordan, *Pragmatic Arguments*, 419.

bad.<sup>81</sup> One can lack good reasons for one's belief and still have a prudentially, instrumentally, or practically rational belief. However, some say it is irrational to put prudential reasons ahead of evidential one's since they presumably conflict. William James, a foundational psychologist of religion, defends prudential reasoning with five valid points:

1. For at least some people, believing in God serves their "passional nature" —they are, in the long run, happier, and better adjusted as a result of believing in God.
2. What's more, for these people, the choice between the options of being a believer and being an unbeliever is "genuine."
3. Whether there really is a God cannot be determined by our intellects. There will never be better evidential reasons in support of theism than atheism, or in support of atheism than theism.
4. Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual, or evidential grounds.
5. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable for the people to choose religious belief, rather than to suspend judgment on the question of whether such belief is true.<sup>82</sup>

Overall, James argues against evidentialism which is the view that rational people try not to let their passions influence their beliefs by forming their beliefs solely based on evidence, while trying to avoid "wishful thinking." If they see more evidence for one thing versus another, then they go with the former, even if they find it disagreeable to do so. If they see no more evidence for one than the other, then they "suspend judgment" on the question of which is true. However, based on scripture, it is reasonable to believe in God if there is strong evidence that God exists. Romans 1:20 says, "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been

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<sup>81</sup>Paul Saka, "Pascal's Wager about God," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/pasc-wag/>

<sup>82</sup>William James, "The Will to Believe," (an address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities, published in the *New World*, June 1896), 2-4.

made. So they are without excuse.” This is clear confirmation to all humankind that there is evidence for all to see, throughout the world, of His existence.

## Chapter 4: Humanity's Quest for Truth and Hope

If we were to look at truth from a Christian perspective, the Bible recognizes truth as vitally important because it is so closely tied to the nature of God and our relationship with Him. If God is what the Bible says—omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, perfect, and holy creator of all, then surely He must know all things. Therefore, truth cannot be defined by imperfect human subjective standards; it must be determined by the Source of truth Himself. Truth can thus be defined theologically as that which conforms to reality as it is perceived by God. As Fernando Luis Canale stated, “The absoluteness of theological truth does not depend on the epistemological characteristics of human reason or the changing realities of temporal beings, but on the transcendent content of divine revelation.”<sup>83</sup>

The question then follows, why is truth important? When observing the dysfunction and chaos in families, schools, our country and the world today, what we are more generally seeing is a confused pluralistic worldview—where societies accept and recognize individual principles and interests, and a person maintains one’s own version of truth. Humanity is becoming more tolerant of these “politically correct” worldviews and more accepting of wrongs versus rights. This pluralism is not a recent phenomenon, although the widespread tolerance is. Pluralism is, in many ways, a diminishment of the importance of a worldview, and allows a plurality of opinions and lifestyles to reside together within relatively small confines. Made possible by secularization, pluralistic tolerance has dethroned religious claims and is providing privileged interpretations of reality. People tolerate a wide variety of worldviews, limited only by such broad guidelines as

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<sup>83</sup>Fernando Luis Canale, “Absolute Theological Truth in Postmodern Times,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 45, no. 1 (2007): 93.

public order and safety.<sup>84</sup> Important for maintaining this arrangement is that no worldview be considered more comprehensive or compelling than any other worldview. Claims to truth in this situation become descriptions of individual taste.<sup>85</sup>

As social, civic, and global anxieties escalate, the need to overcome despair has become urgent. Liberal views dominate the world today, with a person embracing one's own version of reality, making it increasingly difficult to recognize what is true. What exactly is truth? Where can truth be found? Is truth real? The answers to these questions become muddled when secularism continues to expand as belief in God continues to wane. Humanity has become increasingly accepting of everyone's personal truth/beliefs. This increasingly tolerant mind-set allows and even embraces those who do, say, and act however they want or feel. Individual truth/beliefs distort reality and lead to fear, anxiety, and hopelessness. Regardless of what a person believes, there can only be one truth. There cannot be *many truths* or *half-truths* or *part-truths*.

The quest for truth is the quest for completion and perfection, both individually and collectively. For, in deciding how we arrive at truth, we need to understand why people will cling to what has been cast in doubt rather than live without the doubted truth.<sup>86</sup> The historical, social, and cultural factors from different perspectives may help us to understand why finding truth is so important. While examining these factors, the quest for truth is not just for the truth itself, but how the truth helps us. Truth helps order our societies, clear our thinking, and it secures us against our anxieties. It also provides an answer to a question which nags at the

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<sup>84</sup>Robert J.Schreiter, "Absolute Truth and Local Circumstances," *Dialog* 25, no 3 (1986): 182.

<sup>85</sup>Schreiter, "Absolute Truth," 182.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 183.

human heart: Am I really in touch with reality? Is there meaning and purpose to this life? Truth eases our passage through time by giving us a means to assess our situation, and a compass by which to guide our course.<sup>87</sup>

Therefore, it is important to first define truth—more specifically, what it means for a proposition to be true. The most viable secular definition of truth can be found within the ‘correspondence theory of truth’ which claims that a proposition’s being true amounts to its accurately describing the way things are; in short, if a proposition *p* is true, then things are the way *p* says they are.<sup>88</sup> This “theory maintains that the truth of a proposition *p* requires the following two conditions to be met: (1) it is a fact that *p*, and (2) the proposition corresponds to that fact.”<sup>89</sup> Still, there must be a core notion of ‘truth’ and Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests that this core notion “is that of something’s measuring up—that is, measuring up in being or excellence.”<sup>90</sup> On this understanding, a proposition is ‘measuring up’ to reality as it corresponds to the facts.<sup>91</sup>

Despite the many questions we ask in our lifetimes, it is difficult to find fully satisfying answers and for many, the quest for truth never ends. The human longing and desire for many to feel loved is similar. This too is difficult to satisfy and again, for most, will never reach an end. However, there is good news because there is One true source of truth, hope, and love. The Bible

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<sup>87</sup>Schreiter, “Absolute Truth,” 183.

<sup>88</sup>Douglas Blount, “What Does it Mean for the Bible to be True” From *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 3.

<sup>89</sup>Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Guide to Philosophy*, s.v. “Correspondence Theory of Truth,” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>90</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, “True Words” in *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth*, ed. Alan G. Padgett and Patrick R. Keifert (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 39.

<sup>91</sup>Blount, “What Does it Mean,” 10.

describes Christ's infinite love and truth as the only means to satisfy the void within us all. Jesus tells us in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life." The longing for truth and love points us to the fact that human beings are inclined toward the infinite.

In the following quote, Jeffery Burton Russell gives us insight into the pursuit of truth and the Christian context for studying history. In his essay on "Glory in Time" he writes:

Any world view is an act of faith; the tests of it are coherence, humility, charity, openness, and diligence. To the door of truth, the intellect has no key. You stand pounding on it, beating on it until your knuckles bleed and your knucklebones show white. And the door does not open. And that is the job of the intellect: to stand at the door, calling and pounding. If you do not knock, and you do not call, and you do not stand there, then your intellect is without meaning or sense. But then when you least expect it, the door will break open. It will break open like a flower whose petals are light, and the light is love. The door disappears; it breaks away like the husk that hides the truth. And the flower opens up unboundedly wider in a garden of knowledge that is now understandable and meaningful because the intellect is now lit with love.<sup>92</sup>

Russell maintains the basis of all knowledge and all scholarship is love—"love in the sense of empathy, love in the sense of intentionality to truth and love in a sense of honest and open dialogue with those to whom we are writing or speaking."<sup>93</sup> He elaborates on this love which emanates from the Christian God of the Bible:

In this love we come personally—and even to a degree professionally—to a voluntary (not coerced) surrender of self through love. And this voluntary surrender brings real power, the power of our authentic being, the power rooted in Love, which is God, and this power is the opposite of false, oppressive power. It is actual power, and it is liberating. Love is the beginning of understanding, and love is also the goal of understanding. In the end there is no wisdom but love, no knowledge but Christ, no sense in anything but abandonment to the Holy Spirit. You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole mind and your whole soul, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. This is the great commandment upon which hang all the law and the prophets and the libraries and the classes and the speeches and the discussions. Insofar as we open up to that love, our writing and our teaching are blessed and point toward truth;

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<sup>92</sup>Jeffrey Burton Russell, "Glory in Time: A History of the Desire of the Cosmos to Return to God," *Soundings* 22 (1991): 56-57.

<sup>93</sup>Jeffrey Burton Russell, "Dissent, The Devil, and the Return of the Cosmos to God: Writing and Teaching the History of Faith," speech given to Westmont College (n.d.), 17.



insofar as we are stumbling blocks for that love with our sin, selfishness, fear, idolatry, and pride, our voice is empty and without meaning. May our Savior and Friend and Lover and Lord Jesus Christ grant us fewer obstructions and more openness so that his love may flow through us to our students and colleagues and friends and families. However we have blocked him, he can remove those blocks and he will remove those blocks and he does remove those blocks. All we need do is let him. We make ourselves fools; but he can make us fools for Christ.<sup>94</sup>

Based on the previous secular definition of truth where a proposition ‘measures up’ to reality as it corresponds to the facts, the biblical definition on the contrary, does not correspond to reality. Therefore, its truth must involve some other kind of “measuring up,” some other kind of excellence. Blount suggests that the excellence of such discourse amounts to something like fittingness to guide God’s people in righteous living.<sup>95</sup> Or, to put the point differently, the non-assertive discourse “measures up” with respect to trustworthiness; in short, its excellence consists of meriting our trust and submission. “If we take the Bible to be true,” Davis writes, “we trust it to guide our lives. We allow our lives to be influenced by it; we intend to listen where it speaks; we consider it normative; we look to it for comfort, encouragement, challenge, warning, guidance, and instruction. In short, we submit to the Bible, and we place ourselves under its theological authority.” We are right to do so since the Bible speaks truth. In fact, the doctrine of inerrancy arises primarily from the Bible’s teaching about itself. If we articulate this argument we arrive at something like this:

1. The Bible is God’s word.
2. God cannot speak falsely.
3. Therefore, the Bible cannot speak falsely.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Russell, “Dissent,” 17.

<sup>95</sup>Blount, “What Does it Mean,” 3.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

Scripture confirms that all biblical text comes from the will of God (2 Tim 3:16), through the guidance of the Holy Spirit—not from man’s own will or interpretation (2 Pet 1:20-21).

In postmodern society, truth no longer exists in any objective or absolute sense. At best, truth is considered relative. At worst, it's a matter of human convention. Os Guinness points out that truth is a vital requirement for freedom and a good life. He urges people to seek the truth, speak the truth, and live the truth. At the 2010 Lausanne Congress in Cape Town, he said the following:

Skeptics and relativists who undermine the notion of truth are like the fool who is cutting off the branch on which he is sitting. Without truth, science, and all human knowledge collapse into conjecture. Without truth, the vital profession of journalism and how we follow the events of our day and understand the signs of our times dissolve into rumor. Without truth, the worlds of politics and business melt down into rules and power games. Without truth, the precious gift of human reason and freedom becomes (more of a) license, and all human relationships lose the bonding element of trust that is binding at their heart. Postmodern thinking makes us all aware of hypocrisy but gives us no standard of truth to expose and correct it. And now with the global expansion of markets through capitalism, the global expansion of freedom through technology and travel, and the global expansion of human dysfunctions through the breakdown of the family, we are facing the greatest human rights crisis of all time and a perfect storm of evil. Both hypocrisy and evil depend on lies. Hypocrisy is a lie in deeds rather than in words. And evil always uses lies to cover its oppressions. Only with truth can we stand up to deception and manipulation. For all who hate hypocrisy, care for justice and human dignity, and are prepared to fight evil, truth is the absolute requirement. If our faith is not true, it would be false even if the whole world believed it. If our faith is true, it would be true even if the whole world were against it. So let the conviction ring out from this conference. We worship and serve the God of truth and humbly and resolutely, we seek to live as people of truth. Here we still stand, so help us God. As evangelicals we are people of the good news, but may we also always be people of truth, worthy of the God of truth. God is true. God can be trusted in all situations. Have faith in God. Have no fear. Hold fast to truth. And may God be with us all.<sup>97</sup>

Secularists are unable to recognize the reality of divine truth and revelation because it contradicts the rational patterns of reason. However, without truth, there can be no hope. In situations of desperate need, people will either fall into despair or rise above with hope. This ability to hope

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<sup>97</sup>Os Guinness, “Why Truth Matters” (lecture video), Lausanne Congress, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010, “<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4GXVgJYpt0&t=32s>.”

reveals that we have an innate longing for the infinite which can only be satisfied by an infinite God. Therefore, it can be said that human nature is a finite reality with a capacity and thirst for the infinite.

A famous cardiologist named Dr. McNair Wilson remarked in his autobiography, *Doctor's Progress*, "Hope is the medicine I use more than any other—hope can cure nearly anything."<sup>98</sup> Dr. Harold Wolff, a professor of medicine at Cornell University Medical College and associate professor of psychiatry once said, "Hope, life, faith and purpose in life is medicinal. This is not a statement of belief, but a conclusion proved by meticulously controlled scientific experiment."<sup>99</sup>

David Elliot asserts that the ultimate end of human action is identified with happiness and can be traced back to the *eudaimonia* of Greek philosophy.<sup>100</sup> He notes that Thomas Aquinas proposes that the ultimate end of human striving is happiness (beatitude) and believes that hope seeks beatitude, making happiness central to any account of hope. The concept of happiness was morally layered within ancient traditions and is a genuinely ethical category, not just a psychological one concerned with mere contentment beneath philosophical scaffolding.<sup>101</sup>

Elliot maintains that humans have a desire to overcome evils, which inevitably cannot be overcome, and pursue goods and projects whose scope falls short of one's desires.<sup>102</sup> He refers to this bad news for happiness as the 'eudaimonia gap.' Theological hope, he argues, is the only

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<sup>98</sup> Robert McNair Wilson, *Doctor's Progress: Some Reminiscences* (London, UK: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1938), 5.

<sup>99</sup> Harold Wolff, "What Hope Does For Man," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 1953.

<sup>100</sup> David Elliot, *Hope and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 15.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

method by which the eudaimonia gap will finally be overcome. As Scripture says, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). Of course, since every person stands in need of salvation, this is the work of God’s grace rather than human effort.

To be ‘saved’ is to be ‘made safe’ from the power of sin. This is what hope looks towards. As Paul says in Romans 8:19-21, “The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” That ‘futility’ to which creation is now subject is a good theological translation for the ‘impediments’ to happiness. Virtuous efforts can lessen but not overcome the eudaimonia gap. No amount of moral, political, social, or economic progress can liberate us from the futility to which creation is subject and nothing can remove the “sting of death” (1 Cor 15:56). The only road truly and fully beyond the gap is eschatological.<sup>103</sup>

The New Testament offers hope through Christ’s resurrection. Christ hung on the cross, which means none of us are immune to suffering. The good news, however, is the tomb is empty, Christ was resurrected, and the victory is assured (Acts 17:31). This is the unique gift of hope that only Christianity can offer amid life’s trials. The letter to the Hebrews describes hope as “the sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,” (Heb 6:19) and 1 Thessalonians speaks of the Christian persevering in part by donning “the hope of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thess 5:8).<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>Elliot, *Hope and Christian Ethics*, 47.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

Overall, truth and hope can only be found in God. Christ is the only source of everything good, perfect and holy. Because of humanity's innate imperfection (sin), no person or society will ever define or produce a perfect truth. Best case would be a collage of conflicting and contradicting individual truths which would continue to cause despair, confusion, and chaos. The one and only source of truth, hope and love comes from our holy and perfect God of the Bible. Although God's history and truth are independent of our personal and social-historical projects, He invites all of us to center our personal historical projects within the general patterns and dynamics of His own eternal history.<sup>105</sup> As stated in Romans 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." Only in this way can our personal histories share in God's truth and the hope that only He can provide.

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<sup>105</sup>Canale, "Absolute Theological Truth," 100.

## Chapter 5: Pascal's Wager as an Introductory Step Towards Belief in God

Opening a conversation regarding God can be a difficult and uncomfortable task in today's highly secular world. Not only has God been removed from schools, government, and homes, but Christ's name is mocked and even used as a cuss word. Moreover, religion overall has been the cause of many controversies. However, regardless of the world's current situation, Christians are called to be bold and share the good news of the Gospel and the greatest gift of Jesus with all. Pascal's Wager offers a simple, unobtrusive approach that could prompt an unbeliever to consider the existence of God by simply asking a person in betting terms: "Which would be a better bet—live a life as if God does exist and then when you die, which we all will, find out He truly does exist; or live a life believing He does not exist, only to die and find out He does?" This question, at the very least, would make most people think.

Pascal maintains that God is infinite and eternal which he believes is difficult for human reason to grasp. Furthermore, in his *Pensées*, he maintains, "If one submits everything to reason, our religion will contain nothing that is mysterious or supernatural" (162). Accordingly, Pascal's Wager can be a useful, alternative means by which to plant a seed in the mind of an unbeliever. It serves not as a means to an end, rather a means to a beginning. As previously discussed, the risk in betting on the reality of God is worth the reward. However, when weighing their options, many may be reluctant to do so. If one chooses to believe in God, one may miss out on a few so-called "fun" things in life. One may not be able to satisfy every desire, but is it worth giving up a bad habit such as drinking, drugs, or sex? Satisfying such momentary desires provides only momentary fulfillment in a finite lifetime. Therefore, the better option would be to look to eternity and give up something temporal that may not be in a person's best interest anyway and consider the option and hope of eternal bliss. It is simply a matter of choice similar to the choice

to eat healthy and exercise. Not everyone loves to eat healthy and exercise, but the reward is worth the sacrifice. Saying “no” to a donut or a cinnamon roll may be hard, even a sacrifice for some, but the benefit of a fully functioning, healthy body far outweighs the momentary pleasure of decadent food—fully dependent on what a person is willing to sacrifice. Smoking, physical inactivity, and unhealthy diets result in elevated risks of high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol, and heart disease.<sup>106</sup> Being self-disciplined on the other hand by eating right and exercising causes a person’s body to function like a well-oiled machine—to function as it was intended to function. Fattening foods cause a person’s body to malfunction whereas not smoking, exercising, and eating healthy are all consistently associated with improvements in people’s physical health.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, the key to Pascal’s Wager is to compare the finite to the infinite and determine the better option for one’s spiritual health.

Below is a summation of the options of the Wager:

	<u>God exists:</u>	<u>God does not exist:</u>
<u>Faith:</u>	Life 1: Eternal happiness with God (Infinite gain)	Life 3: Live a moral and righteous life for a false cause—may have missed out on some self-satisfying moments. However, no person can ever go wrong by living a moral life. (Potential finite gain or loss depending on one’s perspective)
<u>No faith:</u>	Life 2: Eternal torment without God (Infinite loss)	Life 4: Live a life committed to one’s self-satisfying desires. Acting on selfish desires can cause harm to the person committing the act and could cause harm to others.

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<sup>106</sup>Deborah A. Cobb-Clark, Sonja C. Kassenboehmer, and Stefanie Schurer. “Healthy Habits: The Connection Between Diet, Exercise, and Locus of Control.” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 98 (2014): 1.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 13.

(Potential finite gain or loss  
depending on one's perspective)

Pascal presents a clear choice in his Wager. Choosing to believe in God presents a finite loss for potentially infinite gain whereas disbelief offers a finite gain with potentially infinite loss.

Therefore, the Wager becomes a useful, simple, and unobtrusive tool for believers to open a dialogue regarding God with unbelievers. If a person is open to the discussion and begins to think about the reality of God, the mention of our awe-inspiring universe may be the next best, logical step. Although the mention of God has limited appeal, Rowan Williams claims that humans have an intuitive sense, supported by scientific inquiry, that rightly questions where the universe comes from and how it remains “a bounded, self-consistent, interdependent system.”<sup>108</sup>

The Big Bang Theory is consistent with current measurements of the observable universe; it does not however explain how the universe could have formed by entirely natural means. The Big Bang Theory requires us to accept certain suppositions that fall outside the laws of physics and nature. It violates the first law of thermodynamics, which states that matter or energy cannot be created or destroyed.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, it would be logical to suggest the alternative that perhaps our awesome universe was created by a highly intelligent Creator who has unimaginable power since the one major missing ingredient in the Big Bang Theory is the power source—a source beyond any natural physical law. To this day, there is no conclusive explanation for the beginning of the universe or the perfect, precise motion of everything within it.

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<sup>108</sup>Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 32.

<sup>109</sup>Masanori Iwase, “First, Second, and Third Laws of Thermochemistry,” in *Treatise on Process Metallurgy: Process Fundamentals*, 2014, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/chemistry/first-law-of-thermodynamics>



Scientists have no definitive explanation for the sudden explosion of light and matter. Could it be that God was its source? Within the pages of the Bible, God claims to be the source of all creation: “Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it” (Is 42:5). As the Psalmist says in Psalm 8:3-4, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” In the early 1600s, the great Italian astronomer, Galileo was quoted as saying, “Mathematics is the language in which God has written the universe.”

Agnostic and astrophysicist Robert Jastrow, said, "The seed of everything that has happened in the Universe was planted in that first instant—every star, every planet and every living creature in the universe came into being as a result of events that were set in motion in the moment of this cosmic explosion."<sup>110</sup> He admits, “It is clear that the universe flashed into being, yet we cannot find out what caused it to happen.”<sup>111</sup> Steven Weinberg, a Nobel Laureate in physics, said that at the moment of this explosion, “The universe was about a hundred thousand million degrees centigrade and the universe was just filled with light.” Even the greatest of scientists agree that the universe has not always existed but rather came into being in an instant.

Another magnificent example of God’s handiwork is our human bodies—the most precise and efficient of all machines with their cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, reproductive, skeletal, muscular, nervous, endocrine, lymphatic, digestive and urinary systems. None of us have any control over any of these systems within our bodies. What causes these

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<sup>110</sup>Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (Kingsport, TN: Readers Library, Inc., 2000), 25.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

systems to function so perfectly? The complexity and perfection of our universe, with a perfectly functioning planet that can sustain life, combined with the intricacies and sophisticated design of our bodies, seem to point to a deliberate, intelligent designer, and could thereby prompt an unbeliever to wager on God's existence.

Again, the Bible tells of a God who is the source of all creation. "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:26-27).

The Christian view of God sees creation as caused by God, but with a freedom to make one's own choices. Yet, the uncontrollability of creation leaves ultimate control to God, who can be trusted to bring it to a final culmination in relationship with Him. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:7-10). According to Williams, this implies that the world should view creation and life as a gift, yet in a free relationship with God.<sup>112</sup> As Pascal indicated, the Wager recognizes that human life requires this *relationship with God*, which leads to certain patterns of desiring, acting, and understanding the need for fulfillment of our deepest yearnings.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 32.

<sup>113</sup>Hodge, "Pascal's Wager Today," 709.

The alternative to choosing God is atheism, which is the lack of belief in the existence of God. Hodge maintains that nihilistic atheism in particular argues there is no lasting significance to our lives; existence begins, ends and leads to nothingness.<sup>114</sup> According to nihilists like Friedrich Nietzsche, all values are baseless and there are no universal moral truths. Nihilists believe that institutions like the Christian Church are trying to force subjective values over society, presumably to secure their own power. By denying God's existence, the atheist asserts that humans give up trying to understand their contingent existence since nothing causes it; and there is no real meaning or purpose to life, other than that of power, despair or fleeting happiness. This atheistic belief does not do justice to the question of our existence. Atheists believe people live and enjoy life for what it is. Yet, what is life? How can we understand and enjoy life as rational beings if we cannot know its source, purpose, and context? Nietzsche claimed that people must craft their own identity through self-realization—without relying on anything divine or transcendent—such as God.<sup>115</sup> This atheistic attitude is disingenuous and goes against the deepest intuitions of humanity. Existence cannot lead to nothingness—otherwise, why would we live it?<sup>116</sup> Rather, it is alive with possibility and yearns for eternal bliss. However, radical atheists like Albert Camus see the question of suicide as a natural response to the belief that life is absurd. He says it is absurd to continually seek meaning in life when there is none; and it is absurd to hope for some form of continued existence after death,

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<sup>114</sup>Hodge, "Pascal's Wager Today," 708.

<sup>115</sup>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Friedrich Nietzsche," revised May 19, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/>

<sup>116</sup>Hodge, "Pascal's Wager Today," 709.

which results in our extinction.<sup>117</sup> Camus also thinks it absurd to try to know, understand, or explain the world, since he regards the attempt to gain rational knowledge as futile.

Teaching, training, and instruction are all done with intent, just like a person who writes an instruction manual does so with purpose. There must be a purpose and plan for our lives and the logical explanation for creation would be a God who intentionally created the human race. As Charles Spurgeon stated, “Seeing that all the laws of nature operate only through His power and are sustained by His might, He must be aware of the motion of all the forces in the world.”<sup>118</sup> Whatever God creates, God sustains. Williams asserts, “To speak of God in this context is not to posit a higher being that sits alongside the universe and leaves it to its own devices but is to speak of ‘an activity’ that causes all things and is its own ‘cause,’ eternal and unchanging.”<sup>119</sup> Like the electric current which continuously runs through a light bulb, God’s loving presence continually sustains creation. This view of God presents no conflict between religion and science as it is not a scientific theory about how the universe started, rather it provides a necessary context to understand our lives within a finite universe.<sup>120</sup>

To wager on the side of God, then, is to wager with possibility and infinity: that by opening our finite lives to the infinite possibility of existence and if God does indeed exist, we gain more than we could hope.<sup>121</sup> In it, we gain an understanding of our contingent lives and receive the benefits of a life filled with truth, hope and love. Existence can be seen to not just

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<sup>117</sup>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. “Albert Camus,” revised December 13, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/>

<sup>118</sup>Charles Spurgeon, *Power in Prayer* (New Kensington, PA: Whittaker House, 1996), 8.

<sup>119</sup>Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 37.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid.

<sup>121</sup>Hodge, “Pascal’s Wager,” 708.

start and end with nothing since it is an impossibility for something to come from nothing,<sup>122</sup> but leads to more life. Furthermore, choosing to accept and receive God leads to an infinite life with the One who created it.

Therefore, if we wager on the existence of God, we can freely and fully take up the offer of existence as a gift. Pascal asks us to place our faith—that is, to place our whole selves in trust—in existence itself, and so in God; that life *does* lead somewhere—to the infinite possibilities of giftedness and love which are inscribed in existence itself and for which we yearn deep down.<sup>123</sup> To wager on God is to recognize that we are creatures of giftedness and have been given existence by someone for a purpose. Betting against God means giving up these possibilities and losing sight of the giftedness of existence and the fullness of a loving relationship between humans and their creator. It is this emphasis on finitude, meaning, giftedness and relationality that, if deployed well, the Wager can provoke.<sup>124</sup> The Wager on its own is no guarantee of conversion, but if placed in the context of an existential exploration of the nature of human life, it can bear fruit.<sup>125</sup> The emphasis of the Wager in the modern context can be placed on the need for critical and meaningful existential commitments, and the associated contingency and dependency of our lives, particularly as a person faces death. This discussion of meaning, commitment and contingency may provide avenues for our postmodern culture to contemplate finitude in the context of a gift and relationship.

In this fast-paced, secular world, Pascal's Wager offers believers a simple and unobtrusive option to open a dialogue with an unbeliever concerning God. At the very least, the

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<sup>122</sup>Hodge, "Pascal's Wager," 708.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 710.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

Wager may make even the most skeptical think twice. As believers, we never know whether God has been working in a person's heart. Therefore, it is always worth the effort to see who may be receptive by offering Pascal's Wager as a simple opening dialogue. The Wager could not only prompt a person to think about the reality of God but could potentially further the discussion, while providing the opportunity to reveal more evidence by pointing to God's mighty creation—the precise universe and our perfect human bodies. As Christ followers, God calls us to be bold in our faith and obedient to His commands as written in Mark 16:15, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." May we all share the message of Christ with confidence and boldness.

## **Chapter 6: A Postmodern Day Approach – Put Prayer to the Test**

In this fast-paced, secular world, people experience high levels of fear, anxiety, and stress. During 2020's Covid-19 pandemic, the entire world realized what little control anyone had as we witnessed a microscopic organism spread like wildfire with a devastating impact, causing the entire world to shut down. Even the greatest scientists could not stop or even control the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus, nor were they able to develop an infallible cure. This lack of control caused rampant anxiety and fear and even though the spread of the virus has diminished, its effects are still being felt.

However, the one's clothed in pride, still believe they have control over or have the answers to life's problems and are reluctant to ask for help. Inflated egos convince people that they can figure things out on their own. No matter how intelligent one is, one will continuously deal with heartbreaking, agonizing and frustrating situations that are beyond one's control. Emotional pain in this life is unavoidable and the world is filled with lost and broken people. Since man's fall (Gen. 3), humanity has been born into this imperfection (biblically referred to as 'sin'), leading to broken relationships, broken families, and broken societies. Nothing runs smoothly or perfectly all the time. Life is not easy, and it never will be. However, there is 'one' who can make all our lives whole and complete, who waits patiently for each person to call on His name. He is the 'one' who will make all things new through His free gift of grace. This is the greatest gift of all freely offered to anyone willing to receive it.

As previously discussed, believers must be bold enough to share the Good News of Christ with unbelievers. Most importantly, people need the Gospel in simple terms so that everyone can understand, because Jesus is the only hope they have. Pascal's Wager is a logical first step as it allows a Christian to share something short, simple, to the point, and unobtrusive

with an unbeliever, with the hope of spurring one's heart and mind to think twice about the reality of God. When faced with people's short attention spans, Microsoft's marketing research has found, "it best be clear, personal, relevant and (quickly) get to the point."<sup>126</sup>

Although the subject of God in today's world is difficult to broach, it can be simplified into three steps. Pascal's Wager offers a simple and unobtrusive first-step to initiate a dialog about God with unbelievers. Then, after offering Pascal's Wager, a likely second-step in this fast-paced, secular world filled with pain, anxiety, frustration, and fear, would be to offer a simple prayer. Everyone has a need and as believers, we should do as Jesus did and meet people at their needs by asking if they have prayer requests. The third-step would be to encourage them also to pray on their own. Especially if they are struggling with a particular problem, situation, or job, whatever it is, encourage them to pray and ask God for help, while assuring them it can be done informally in private where no one else will even see or know. For people to believe in something, most need to see and experience clear evidence. We all know it is difficult to believe in something we cannot see. Therefore, the best form of evidence is for people to experience God for themselves, and this can be done through prayer. Prayer is not about God fulfilling our selfish desires and getting what we want. Rather, prayer opens the door and invites God to enter a person's life. Since God gave each of us free will, He would never push Himself on anyone. He leaves the choice of whether to believe in Him to each of us since true love cannot be forced. A person cannot reply to an email if one never received it, and God cannot answer prayers unless a person prays for something.

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<sup>126</sup>Microsoft Canada, "Attention Spans." *Microsoft Research*, (2015), chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf.



Therefore, when people pray, not only are they inviting God into their lives, but they could potentially experience the positive changes such as love, peace, and joy that only He can provide. Personally speaking, there is nothing more incredible than experiencing an answer to prayer. This is one of the greatest foundational blocks to building a person's faith. An answered prayer (whether we like the answer or not) is clear evidence of God's existence. People can make random or educated guesses all they want about the reality of God, but nothing can prove and build a person's faith like an answered prayer. Not only is prayer unobtrusive, but it can be done in private, and is as simple as an informal dialog within a person's mind, without anyone else knowing. By prayer, one openly invites God to step into one's life, potentially experience proof of His existence, as well as the positive transformational power God can have in a person's life. Prayer is a perfect example of having nothing to lose and everything to gain.

James defined prayer as "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine."<sup>127</sup> Many people are looking to a higher power for comfort these days and prayer can foster a sense of connection with a higher power, says Kevin Ladd, a psychologist and director of the Social Psychology of Religion Lab at Indiana University South Bend. He maintains that people pray for many reasons, including for guidance, thanksgiving, solace, and protection.<sup>128</sup> According to an analysis of search results for 95 countries by an economist at the University of Copenhagen, the number of Google searches for prayer skyrocketed in March 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>129</sup> A Pew Research

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<sup>127</sup>James, "The Will to Believe," 2.

<sup>128</sup>"The Science of Prayer," The Wall Street Journal, May 20, 2020, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/the-science-of-prayer-2.html>

<sup>129</sup>"Google Searches on Prayer Skyrocketed Amid Covid-19 Crisis, Study Says," Evangelical Focus, Copenhagen, April 3, 2020, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/lifetech/5232/Searches-on-prayer-skyrocketed-amid-coronavirus-crisis-study-says>.

Center survey in March 2020 also found that more than half of Americans prayed to end the spread of Covid-19.<sup>130</sup>

Thomas Aquinas states, “We do not pray in order to change God’s plan, but in order to obtain by our prayers those things which God planned to bring about by means of prayers.”<sup>131</sup> We can still make sense of asking for something we need from a source that is able to provide it. For this reason, if God is the Maker of all things, to ask God for what we want certainly makes sense.<sup>132</sup> The goal of prayer is to encourage unbelievers to put it to the test so they can see for themselves how God potentially answers prayer. Therefore, they can experience first-hand how real He is!

Although prayer is one of the most pervasive practices in religious life, non-religious people shy away from it. With today’s advanced technology, science and medicine, people face the question of whether prayer can affect anything.<sup>133</sup> Rudolph Bultmann made a point years ago criticizing prayer that still holds true today, saying, “It is impossible to use the electric light and the wireless and to avail oneself of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”<sup>134</sup> Moreover, in a world that is busy, hurried, spiritually detached and full of distractions, one of the farthest things from people’s minds is prayer.

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<sup>130</sup>“Most Americans Say Coronavirus Outbreak Has Impacted Their Lives,” Pew Research Center, March 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/03/30/most-americans-say-coronavirus-outbreak-has-impacted-their-lives/>

<sup>131</sup>Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 262.

<sup>132</sup>Brian Davies, “The Power of Prayer,” *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 102, no 1097 (2021): 5.

<sup>133</sup>Tyron Inbody, “The Power of Prayer and the Mystery of Evil,” *Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. 81, no 1 (1999): 62.

<sup>134</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 5.

However, scientists who study prayer have found that people who pray, benefit from a feeling of emotional support. For example, if one carries a fifty-pound backpack for several hours, it will start to feel impossibly heavy, but if someone else offers to carry it, it will immediately alleviate one's burden. "This is what prayer can do,"<sup>135</sup> says Amy Wachholtz, associate professor and clinical health psychology director at the University of Colorado. "It lets you put down your burden mentally for a bit and rest."<sup>136</sup> The Bible confirms this in Matthew 11:28 when Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Dr. David H. Rosmarin, assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School and director of the Spirituality and Mental Health Program at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts says the research on prayer shows it may have similar benefits to meditation: It can calm your nervous system while halting your fight or flight response and make you less angry and less reactive to negative emotions.<sup>137</sup> Rosmarin, who incorporates prayer into the treatment programs for some patients with anxiety, depression or other mental-health conditions, tells people who are curious about prayer to imagine a heart-to-heart conversation with someone they haven't talked to in a while. A 2005 study in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* comparing secular meditation, which focuses on breathing or a nonspiritual word, with spiritual meditation, which focuses on a higher power, a spiritual word or text, and found spiritual meditation to be more calming.<sup>138</sup> Participants were divided into groups, with some being taught how to meditate using words of self-affirmation ("I am love") and others taught how to meditate with words that

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<sup>135</sup>"The Science of Prayer," <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/the-science-of-prayer-2.html>.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

described a higher power (“God is love”). Each meditated for twenty minutes a day for four weeks.<sup>139</sup> Researchers found that the group that practiced spiritual meditation showed greater decreases in anxiety and stress and more positive moods; they also tolerated pain almost twice as long when asked to put their hand in an ice water bath.<sup>140</sup>

A 2004 study on religious coping methods in the *Journal of Health Psychology* found that people who consider God as a collaborator in their lives had positive physical and mental outcomes. People who are angry at God or feel punished or abandoned had less positive results.<sup>141</sup> It’s similar to the way a loving relationship to a partner brings out the best in you, says Dr. Pargament, the lead researcher on the study.<sup>142</sup>

Overall, it can be said that prayer is an effective and useful tool in a time of need. Kenneth Pargament, an emeritus professor in the department of psychology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, who studies how people use religion to cope with major life stressors and trauma says that “the general trend is for the religious impulse to quicken in a time of crisis.”<sup>143</sup> A 26-year-old event producer in New York says that “there’s so much uncertainty right now and so little in my power that when I bust out a quick prayer, especially out loud, I feel a shift inside myself from tension and distrust to a more trusting, hopeful feeling.”<sup>144</sup> Prayer is popularly relied upon for coping with difficult life circumstances and may serve a stress deterrent

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<sup>139</sup>“The Science of Prayer.”

<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid.

<sup>143</sup>Ibid.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid.

effect during such circumstances.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, from a review of empirical research on prayer, it was found that prayer appears to be related to at least some measures of well-being.

Not only can an immediate answer to prayer be used to confirm God’s existence, but continual prayers over time can help build one’s faith when one experiences a positive transformation in one’s life. Prayer is a very powerful tool and valid evidence of a God who answers prayers, especially when it comes to a troubled marriage. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that nearly fifty-percent of all marriages in the United States end in divorce.<sup>146</sup> However, according to several studies at Florida State University, prayer can help marriages. Researchers there have found that when people pray for the well-being of their spouses when feeling negative emotions in the marriage, both partners—the one praying and the one being prayed for—report greater relationship satisfaction.<sup>147</sup> “Prayer gives couples a chance to calm down,” says Frank Fincham, eminent scholar in the College of Human Sciences at Florida State University, who conducted the studies. Mark H. Butler found the same—that many couples use prayer as an effective tool to facilitate conflict resolution and positive relationship dynamics.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, prayer has been related to decreased rates of infidelity as well as more positive marital adjustment. Other research similarly indicates that joint (marital and family) religious activities, including but not limited to prayer, are associated with increased marital

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<sup>145</sup>Michael E. McCullough, “Prayer and Health: Conceptual Issues, Research Review, and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 23, no 1 (1995): 20.

<sup>146</sup>“Marriage and Divorce,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm>

<sup>147</sup>“The Science of Prayer.”

<sup>148</sup>M. H. Butler, J.A. Stout, and B.C. Gardner. “Prayer as a Conflict Resolution Ritual,” *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol. 30 (2002): 32.

adjustment, and increased perceived benefits of marriage.<sup>149</sup> In general, data collected by T. G. Hatch offer evidence that prayer serves as a positive and transformative force in many marriages that have weathered the challenges of dynamic selves, spouses, children, and contexts. More importantly, the participants' reports explain and illuminate how and why prayer can serve as a transformative force in some marriages.<sup>150</sup> Transformation is more often an important but ongoing "process that perennially produces revitalizing marital energy in many lasting marriages"<sup>151</sup>

Overall, as our culture becomes increasingly hostile to traditional forms of religion, and more interested in practices and worldviews that promise spiritual fulfillment, research may demonstrate to the skeptic that biblical spirituality yields outcomes such as purpose, sense of communion with the divine, and contact with spiritual power; that prayer can lead, in many cases, to better adaptation to life stressors; that God answers prayer.<sup>152</sup> In light of such "evidence," it is a believer's hope and prayer that the postmodern skeptic may express some interest in biblical spirituality as a source of nourishment in a spiritually impoverished culture.

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<sup>149</sup>T. G. Hatch, L D Marks, E A Bitah, M. Lawrence, N. M. Lambert, D. C. Dollahite, and B. P. Hardy, "The Power of Prayer in Transforming Individuals and Marital Relationships: A Qualitative Examination of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Families," *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 1 (2016): 29.

<sup>150</sup>Ibid.

<sup>151</sup>L. D. Marks, "Prayer and Marital Intervention: Asking for Divine Help... or Professional Trouble?" *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 27, no. 7 (2008): 684.

<sup>152</sup>McCullough, Michael E. "Prayer and Health: Conceptual Issues, Research Review, and Research Agenda," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. Vol. 23, Issue 1 (1995): 16.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, time is not on our side since we are finite beings. Our time here on earth is limited and the time is now for all Christians to embark on a search and rescue mission to share the Gospel of truth with unbelievers. In an increasingly post-Christian world with limited attention-spans, it is becoming increasingly imperative to establish a quick and effective way to engage in conversations about God with unbelievers. Accordingly, this thesis has examined how Pascal's Wager, in this fast-paced, secular world, can be effectively used as a simple and quick method to engage in conversations about God with unbelievers while encouraging them to consider the reality of God by putting the power of prayer to the test. Because of humanity's unknowing desperate need of God, people are innately unsettled and searching to fill a void that lies within us all. Therefore, the benefit and reward of experiencing an answer to prayer far outweighs the risk.

To wager on God is to live a life conducive to faith. Not betting on God means losing out on the fullness of a loving relationship between humans and their creator which is the greatest gift of all. The Wager on its own does not guarantee conversion or salvation, but in the context of an empirical investigation of the nature of human life, the Wager can bear fruit. God is not just an "interesting" or abstract idea but a necessary and important way of understanding the meaning of existence.

Based on the evidence established in this thesis, I have argued that the offer to bet on God, as set forth in Pascal's Wager, should be accepted by anyone who thinks there is some probability that the Wager might be sound. After examining the facts presented regarding the Wager, the benefits of choosing God and winning far outweigh the benefits of choosing against Him and winning.

The simplicity of the Wager can spur an unbeliever to consider the reality of God—the only ONE who can satisfy humanity’s longings. Therefore, as Christians, we must be bold, and share the Wager with unbelievers. Following the Wager, a next likely postmodern approach would be to encourage unbelievers to put prayer to the test in hopes they experience clear evidence of God. People are more apt to believe in something if they have evidence, therefore unbelievers can put the power of prayer to the test and experience God for themselves. As believers, it is our duty to share the Good News of Christ with all, since only He can offer the greatest gift of salvation and fill the emptiness which humanity yearns to fill. As an unbeliever myself not that long ago, I am living proof that whoever wagers on God and reaches out to Him through prayer (Mat. 7:7-8) will indeed find Him and experience clear evidence. We must never underestimate the power of our mighty, living God and the power of prayer.



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