

## Jesus and a Piece of Chalk

You might have encountered the following story on email or on the web:

This is a true story of something that happened just a few years ago at USC.

There was a professor of philosophy who was a deeply committed atheist. His primary goal for one required class was to spend the entire semester attempting to prove that God couldn't exist.

His students were always afraid to argue with him because of his impeccable logic.

For twenty years, he had taught this class and no one ever had the courage to go against him. Sure, some had argued in class at times, but no one had ever really gone against him because of his reputation.

At the end of every semester on the last day, he would say to his class of 300 students, "If there is anyone here who still believes in Jesus, stand up!" In twenty years, no one had ever stood up. They knew what he was going to do next. He would say, "Because anyone who believes in God is a fool. If God existed, he could stop this piece of chalk from hitting the ground and breaking. Such a simple task to prove that He is God, and yet He can't do it." And every year, he would drop the chalk onto the tile floor of the classroom and it would shatter into a hundred pieces.

All of the students would do nothing but stop and stare. Most of the students thought that God couldn't exist. Certainly, a number of Christians had slipped through, but for 20 years, they had been too afraid to stand up.

Well, a few years ago there was a freshman who happened to enroll.

He was a Christian, and had heard the stories about his professor. He was required to take the class for his major, and he was afraid. But for three months that semester, he prayed every morning that he would have the courage to stand up no matter what the professor said, or what the class thought. Nothing they said could ever shatter his faith.....he hoped.

Finally, the day came. The professor said, "If there is anyone here who still believes in God, stand up!" The professor and the class of 300 people looked at him, shocked, as he stood up at the back of the classroom.

The professor shouted, "You FOOL!!! If God existed, he would keep this piece of chalk from breaking when it hit the ground!"

He proceeded to drop the chalk, but as he did, it slipped out of his fingers, off his shirt cuff, onto the pleat of his pants, down his leg, and off his shoe.

As it hit the ground, it simply rolled away unbroken.

The professor's jaw dropped as he stared at the chalk. He looked up at the young man, and then ran out of the lecture hall.

The young man who had stood, proceeded to walk to the front of the room and shared his faith in Jesus for the next half hour. 300 students stayed and listened as he told of God's love for them and of His power through Jesus.

I'm fairly certain that this story isn't true. A professor who purposefully humiliated students or proselytized in this way for *any* position, atheistic or otherwise, would be severely reprimanded and potentially fired so a course like the one described couldn't exist for very long. Furthermore, USC denies the story, and it has been acknowledged as false on a number of web sites that repeat it for its inspirational value.

Of course, the fact that these events never actually *happened* doesn't mean that the story isn't important. Lots of important truths are conveyed in a fictional form. And it's getting clear about what the story is trying to say that most interests me. It isn't trying to convince anyone that God exists or to persuade anyone of the truth of Christianity because it's aimed at people who already believe. At least that's how I interpret it. So, what is it saying to those people? I can think of three distinct possibilities, although there may be more

1) Don't be mindless or fickle.

In the story, a lot of people were incredibly mindless and incredibly fickle. The students who were convinced that God doesn't exist simply (or largely) because the chalk breaks were both mindless and fickle. It's reasonable to think that if God exists he *could* keep the chalk from breaking, but that doesn't mean that he *would*, so the fact that he *doesn't* keep it from breaking proves nothing. The professor, when he fled the room after the chalk didn't break, was both mindless and fickle. Granting that God could prevent the chalk from breaking, it doesn't follow that any unbroken chalk is saved by God. In fact, the story gives a pretty good naturalistic explanation for what happened. So we have a lot of models here about what *not* to do: We shouldn't give up on important beliefs too easily. I like this moral. Certainly, we shouldn't just throw in the towel when faced with the slightest opposition, whether our towel is theism, atheism, or anything else.

2) Don't allow reason to affect your beliefs.

It's unclear what attitude the freshman took to the class, whether he took the professor's arguments seriously and tried to rebut them (even in the privacy of his own dorm room) or whether he simply ignored them. The implication, I think, is that he probably ignored them, in which case we should probably reconsider whether we can take him as a good role model. Faith is a tricky thing. If we understand faith as deciding to believe something, like "God exists" or "God doesn't exist," *regardless of the evidence or*

*arguments at hand*, then faith is bound to give us false beliefs most of the time. Just like we shouldn't be mindless and fickle, we probably shouldn't be mindless and suborn, either. If we decide that the evidence really does point in a certain direction, we should probably believe in that direction, too – or at least be open to the possibility.

So if the story is telling us that we shouldn't abandon our beliefs too soon, that we should try to refute counterarguments and that we should give ourselves plenty of time to do it (the first possible lesson) then I agree with the story. But if the argument is telling us that we should hold on to our beliefs come what may, even if, after reflection, we decide that the evidence against our beliefs is convincing or overwhelming (the second possible lesson), then I disagree with the story. But there's another possible moral that I find pretty disturbing. Specifically...

3) Philosophy is opposed to religion, and dangerous to religious people.

I can see why some people believe this. After all, philosophy *is* usually opposed to blind faith because philosophy believes in the power of reason. This means that "I just do," is not an acceptable answer, in a philosophy classroom, to the question "Why do you believe in God?" But "I just don't" wouldn't be a good answer to the question "Why don't you believe in God?" either.

Most philosophers (and virtually all of us in our professorial capacity) want people to support their beliefs with halfway decent arguments. We don't care so much what those beliefs *are*. This means that we'd prefer our students to believe in God for good reasons than to disbelieve in God for bad reasons. Whether people believe in God or not is really none of our concern.

So why is the philosopher sometimes (mis)perceived as a rabid atheist who wants nothing more than to "infect" other people? Probably because some people are threatened by the very enterprise of evaluating arguments for and against God. Probably because some people confuse "This is a bad argument for God's existence" with "There are no good arguments for God's existence" and then confuse "There are no good arguments for God's existence" with "God doesn't exist." It's an easy mistake to make. And (I fear) *some* religious people who ought to know better *encourage* it. Many religions and religious people, of course, hold that God gave us brains for a reason, and they, like philosophers, want people to *think*, not just *believe*. Unfortunately, a minority of religions and religious people *don't* want people to think, and I'm not sure why. Maybe they're afraid that people aren't smart enough to see through bad arguments for atheism, and so they decide that it's better to keep people safe from philosophy by locking it away, sort of like we lock medicine and other dangerous things way from little children who don't know better and who might injure themselves. Maybe they're afraid that some philosophers are just *very clever* but not *very nice* and that these philosophers might win "debating points" against a theist at the theist's psychological expense. (And certainly some philosophers *are* like this. There are bad apples in ever barrel.) Maybe, in particularly nasty cases, these religions don't want people to think because they want *unthinking allegiance* to their own particular sect. Obviously, I don't

like religions that don't want people to think (although I'd be happy to change my mind if faced with a good argument for them!). If God exists, I'm inclined to suppose that he's big enough for us to think about.