

J E S U S

O R

~~N O T H I N G~~

D a n D e W i t t

Foreword by
RUSSELL D. MOORE

Jesus or Nothing

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Foreword

Russell D. Moore

Atheists are easy to hate, until you can't help but love one.

What I mean is that, despite all our supposed secularization, it takes a certain sort of cultural courage to say, "I don't believe in God." Since that's the case, most of the high-profile people proclaiming as much in public are people with adrenaline firing in a quest to disprove or ridicule faith, especially the Christian faith. But judging atheists by the pamphleteers and the professionally irreligious is akin to unbelievers judging Christians by our most outrageous prosperity-hawking television evangelists.

Most people learn to love atheists by learning to love an atheist—maybe a son or a daughter, or an old college roommate; someone who just can't believe anymore that at the nub of this whirling universe there's a Father. When one knows, and loves, someone like that, one realizes that this isn't part of some conspiratorial plot to attack the faith. This is someone who has lost his or her story—and is looking for a way to make sense of a cosmos filled with quasars and waterfalls, of pythons and parasites.

The book you hold in your hand—or view on your screen—isn't an argument. It's not more intellectual ammunition designed to help you win a debate over coffee. It is something I saw buzzing about in the author's life for years—as he learned to love some atheists. He didn't see them as projects or prizes—some sort of spiritual taxi-dermy to hang on his mantle if he won them to Christ. He saw them as friends—to be witnessed to, of course, but also to be listened to. This book is meant to awaken your imagination in two directions—first, toward the wonder of what it means that this story we find ourselves in is really true. There really is a dynamically alive ex-corpse who is bending all of history toward himself. You really are accepted, and forgiven, and welcome if you're hidden in him. You really have nothing to fear—from your past guilt or from your future casket. But this book will also turn your imagination toward those around you who just can't find that old, old story to be good, good news.

The author is a bright Christian scholar, a winsome Christian teacher. But he's also one who knows what it is like to follow his Lord toward sitting down with those far from the kingdom—and with a provocative tranquility show them a story that, if as true as we believe it is, upends everything. The kingdom of God is not, the Scriptures tell us, a matter of talk but of power. This book is electric with kingdom power—the kind of power that casts out darkness, tears down strongholds, and tells a story just wild enough to love.

Introduction

The Power of Nothing

He saw Nothing. Beyond the shrubbery in his front yard, he saw Nothing. The landscaping pointed simply to itself and not to a grand designer in the sky. The bushes didn't host fairies or goblins. They had nothing to do with gods or holy books. They just were.

That's how Mark Bauerlein, professor of English at Emory University, describes his teenage conversion to atheism.¹ Mark's experience is not uncommon. Another skeptic once shared with me that he became an atheist as a boy shortly after a close friend died. The thought of his friend peering into his preteen adolescent activities sort of creeped him out. And so he came to grips with Nothing. There was Nothing beyond death. There was no heaven. And there was no God.

Sometimes Nothing can be quite therapeutic. It's likely that Nothing has soothed your fears at some point in your life. Parents calm their children with the words, "There's

nothing in the closet.” No monsters. No bogeymen. Nothing. You can go back to bed and rest in peace: this Nothing can’t hurt you.

This is why the recent atheistic marketing campaign caused such a stir. For many the message connected with a deep longing for ultimate liberation: “God probably doesn’t exist. Go ahead and enjoy the rest of your life.” This proposal touches a nerve in the believing community as well. Many professing Christians, for all practical purposes, live as functional atheists with little regard for God’s sovereign rule over their daily lives.

This is not to say that atheists stop with Nothing. But for many, perhaps most, Nothing is where they begin. That’s where it began for Zach. He grew up in a conservative Christian home in the bluegrass state of Kentucky. His devout parents sent him to a fundamentalist Christian school from kindergarten through high school graduation. He was well versed in the sort of things that make Nothing all the more appealing.

After eighteen years of emotional revival services, fiery church business meetings, silly youth group antics, endless rules and regulations, and leadership resignations due to moral downfalls, he was ready for something else. And he found it in the local community college. He breathed deeply the fresh air of intellectual diversity. For the first time in his life he felt truly free.

He first contemplated the possibilities of Nothing in a biology class his second semester, where his professor

presented the merits of evolution. The theory was nearly forbidden in his private high school. It was worse than a four-letter word. Yet here it was discussed in a rational and persuasive manner. Now when Zach looked out at the world, with its own natural explanations, he saw Nothing. And it was beautiful.

Zach later transferred to a large state university to pursue a degree in humanities. He spent the summer after his junior year with a group of students from a humanist campus organization serving the poor in Haiti. He caringly handed food rations to impoverished youth amid trash heaps. He and his colleagues toiled beneath the summer sun to make a difference one child at a time. The grateful, yet sunken, brown eyes of starving boys and girls were more than enough to make his sacrifice seem relatively insignificant, yet powerfully satisfying. He didn't do it for religion. He did it for hungry children.

He always thought that if he embraced Nothing, he would instantly morph into some sort of morally reprehensible monster. He quickly discarded this misconception, along with a host of others he had heard throughout childhood. Early in his senior year he made the dreaded phone call to his parents and told them he was no longer a Christian. They were devastated. At the fork in the road between Jesus and Nothing, he chose Nothing.

And who can blame him?

His story is repeated countless times at colleges across America. I've had the wonderful privilege of meeting many

students like Zach over the last several years as I've led a campus ministry at a secular school. I've been pleasantly surprised by the healthy discussions that are possible between Christians and skeptics. All too often caricatures of both sides thwart meaningful relationships.

We started our ministry with three seminars, one a month, spread out over an academic semester. Perhaps the titles of our events illustrate why a number of skeptics regularly attended our gatherings: "What I Hate about Religion," "What I've Learned from Atheism," and last but not least, "What I Love about the Gospel." From the beginning we sought common ground to engage in meaningful conversations. Christian ministries regularly limit themselves to monologue—we longed for dialogue.

Though I'm now the dean of a Bible college, I still have regular opportunities to speak to university students. When given the occasion to address the topic of the Christian faith, I often use the book of Colossians to outline my presentation. There are numerous paths a discourse about faith can take, and I've found that the simplicity of Paul's short letter provides helpful parameters for demonstrating the gospel's unique ability to provide an objective basis for human flourishing.

My presentation of the gospel, grounded in Colossians, has evolved over the years. And so have I. My understanding of both the gospel and the human condition continue to deepen and flavor the way I talk about Jesus. In many ways this book is a culmination of the interactions, con-

versations, relationships, and dialogues about the gospel that I've shared with thoughtful and intelligent students, believers and unbelievers alike.

This is a book for Zach, and many like him who have considered walking away from their childhood faith in favor of a different worldview. I hope to contrast the narrative of the gospel with what I believe to be an inevitable nihilism that permeates a godless universe.

I recognize that my words cannot—in and of themselves—convince a cynic or convert a sinner. Yet, it is my aim, and my prayer, that this short book will encourage believers in their love of the gospel, challenge skeptics in their rejection of it, and assist Christian parents and leaders as they contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).

My goal is not to offer finely tuned apologetic arguments—though there are several references to such defenses—but instead to ask the reader to envision what the world would look like if the gospel were actually true. If this book achieves anything, I hope it shows, even to some small measure, that Christianity is both plausible and desirable. And who knows: maybe it's also true. Just imagine.

Welcome to the human epic of Jesus or Nothing.

The Tale of Two Stories

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch
of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was
the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope,
it was the winter of despair, we had everything
before us, we had nothing before us . . .

Charles Dickens

Long before Charles Dickens penned *A Tale of Two Cities* depicting the class struggle between the French bourgeois and the aristocracy, Saint Augustine described a more costly battle. His classic work *The City of God* outlined the conflict between seeking fulfillment in the fleeting pleasures of this world (the City of Man) and finding ultimate purpose from above (the City of God). The epic of two cities, the tale of two stories, outlines the history of human existence.

Consider the responses to the terrorist attacks of 2001: churches overflowed in the days following the tragic acts now remembered simply as 9/11. However, beyond the national calls to prayer and the revival of church attendance across America, another movement emerged to capture the attention of book publishers and commentators around the world. The campaign quickly earned the title of The New Atheism and not only challenged religion's answer to the problem of evil, but also directed public attention to religion itself as the source of all evil.

In their 2010 book *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* authors Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate describe the New Atheist movement as an attempt to establish a cultural narrative. As an atheist and a Christian respectively, the authors provide an interesting critique of the new movement: "For us, the New Atheists' desire to create a new mythos might also explain why they are so interested in literature: what starts out as science-as-novel could almost be said to reach its logical conclusion in the novel-as-science."¹

These two accounts—theism and atheism—mark the polar extremes of humanity's quest for truth. They simplify and summarize the most complex of all theories and philosophies. And they cannot both be true. Thus, humanity stands at an impasse facing the solemn choice between the City of God and the City of Man. The central plot of every narrative is built upon this decision. This is where every story begins.

The Story of Nothing

G. K. Chesterton, the British journalist and philosopher, published the novel *The Ball and the Cross* in 1909 about two characters, a devout Christian and an ardent atheist, portrayed as the only sane men on the planet because they recognized the significance of their views and were willing to stand for their convictions. In his classic style, Chesterton contrasts “the ball” (the earth) with “the cross” (Christianity) to illustrate what he deems to be the only two viable options regarding ultimate reality. The world either points to itself or points beyond itself to a transcendent God.

When I speak of Nothing throughout this book, I do so in a manner similar to Chesterton’s novel. The Nothing is a worldview that accepts the earth as an end in itself. This outlook is free from all religious beliefs and explanations. It is unhindered by divine revelation. It is untainted by church tradition. For many, it represents ultimate emancipation.

A great number of those who embrace this perspective work diligently to establish meaning and significance apart from God, and they are to be commended for their efforts. The term *Nothing* is not intended to trivialize their position. I’ve known many skeptics who live exemplary lives. And I have good friends, like Zach, who are secularists who are moral, kind, and thoughtful individuals.

Conversely, I’ve also known believers who don’t live consistently with the very foundations they claim to em-

brace. Sadly, I need look no further for examples of this than to my own life. So this book isn't about who is the most moral or even the most intelligent. It's about the big decision every person must make in life. It's about the importance of this decision. And it's about the inevitability of making a choice between Jesus or Nothing.

I'm truly thankful for the bold vision of flourishing offered by many humanists today, yet, like Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias, I find it difficult to draw a logical connection between a secular worldview and the corresponding values. Zacharias provides a helpful description:

Why don't we see more atheists like Jean Paul Sartre, or Friedrich Nietzsche, or Michel Foucault? These three philosophers, who also embraced atheism, recognized that in the absence of God, there was no transcendent meaning beyond one's own self-interests, pleasures, or tastes. . . . Without God, there is a crisis of meaning, and these three thinkers, among others, show us a world of just stuff, thrown out into space and time, going nowhere, meaning nothing.²

The recognition that apart from God there is a loss of transcendent meaning is central to the philosophy known as nihilism. I'll mention this outlook several times throughout this book. The term *nihilism* is based on the Latin word *nihil*, meaning "nothing." This is a view of reality that recognizes that the world by itself, apart from the existence of God, offers no intrinsic meaning or value.

Francis Schaeffer, the late Christian philosopher, believed that atheism and nihilism are inextricably connected. There are but two viable, mutually exclusive, ultimate worldview options: theism and nihilism. He contended that the logical conclusions of atheism are unlivable, forcing the secularist to live on capital borrowed from a theistic worldview.³

Schaeffer was not saying, and neither am I, that nonbelievers are immoral or unloving, but that their worldview commitments don't logically lead to the values they embrace. That's why Schaeffer said that humanists have their feet "firmly planted in midair"⁴ because their understanding of reality does not establish a foundation capable of upholding their ideals.

Like Schaeffer, philosopher Alex Rosenberg sees atheism as leading inevitably to nihilism (though he prefers the nuanced term *nice nihilism*). In his book *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions*, Rosenberg offers a serious discussion of the implications of his *scientism* (a term he prefers over *atheism*). He describes scientism as a worldview that only accepts answers clearly provided by science.

Rosenberg understands that he cannot have his cake and eat it too. "When it comes to ethics, morality, and value," he writes, "we have to embrace an unpopular position that will strike many people as immoral as well as impious. So be it. . . . If you are going to be scientistic, you will have to be comfortable with a certain amount

of nihilism.⁵” Though he recognizes that this conclusion presents some public relations challenges for atheism, he makes a case for embracing it nonetheless since “scientism can’t avoid nihilism.”⁶

While secular humanists will debate this point, readers must consider whether they are able to provide an *objective* basis for their perspectives. Protagoras, the early Greek philosopher, famously said, “Man is the measure of all things.” This is something of a creed for humanism, yet it illustrates that apart from God our values become dangerously relative. Without God we can either look for subjective meaning within or search without for significance from an uncaring cosmos.

Philosophers aren’t the only ones to recognize the loss of objective value in the absence of God. “We are more insignificant than we ever imagined,” said Lawrence Krauss, celebrated theoretical physicist, at the 2009 meeting of the Atheist Alliance International. While Krauss’s gift of humor makes his elaborate presentations entertaining, it doesn’t make his conclusions any easier to swallow. He continues:

If you take the universe—everything we see—stars and galaxies and clusters—everything we see: If you get rid of it, the universe is essentially the same. We constitute a one-percent bit of pollution in a universe that is thirty-percent dark matter and seventy-percent dark energy. We are completely irrelevant. Why such

a universe in which we're so irrelevant would be made for us is beyond me.⁷

I understand Krauss's point of how the scope of the universe makes our existence seem irrelevant, but what if we aren't the point of creation? For that matter, what if creation is not the point of creation? What if there is a Creator behind it all, and what if he is the ultimate point of all things? What if Krauss is reading the wrong story line? While it's worth considering the implications if Krauss's premise were right, what if he's not?

The Story of the Gospel

On the other hand, the gospel portrays each of us as a sort of mixed bag. We are both great and wretched. If the gospel is true, then we are created in the image of God. So that means we are not trivial despite our abysmally small size in comparison to the expanding universe. In fact, Scripture places humanity at the pinnacle, though not the center, of the created world with the important mandate to steward the earth.

Scripture frequently explains God's sovereignty with the reminder of his exclusive role in creation. Take the Old Testament example of Job: when faced with Job's accusations of unfairness, God simply asks Job where he happened to be on the day when the foundations of the world were established. The point is simple, and Job gets it: God is supreme above all created things.

Even though humans are the apex of creation, we are

not autonomous. God reigns supremely over all that he has made. In our depravity, however, we seek to move God out of his rightful position and assert ourselves as the sole authority of our lives.

While the gospel reveals our intrinsic value as the height of creation, it also shows the depth of our depravity through our multifaceted and ever-creative forms of mutiny. Humans are highly competent sinners. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that we—like Adam and Eve—have a moral attraction for forbidden fruit and an aversion to moral accountability. Perhaps that's why the peaceful garden of Eden spans only two chapters in the biblical narrative. An earthly utopia is presented as a mere speed bump on the road to redemption.

Yet, the gospel offers hope for wandering hearts like ours. The Bible reveals that instead of judging all of humanity in one fell swoop—God visited us in our despair. The gospel is the story of God writing himself into human history. Of course, if God really does exist, then he has been a part of the story from the very beginning. Thus, the gospel is really not our introduction to God, but rather our re-introduction.

Christianity makes the unique claim that God actually entered the human theater to take on flesh and reassume the leading role (John 1). That is why the gospel is first and foremost a historical claim. If Jesus did not exist in real history, if he did not rise from the dead according to the Scriptures, then Christianity is false.

But how might reality be different if Jesus actually did (and still does) exist? What if the resurrection really happened? What if a relationship with God is in fact the most fulfilling experience any human can ever know? What if the gospel really is true?

In short, the gospel is the narrative of Christ's miraculous birth, perfect life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. The holidays of Christmas and Easter form bookends in the story of Jesus summarized in the simple word *gospel*. "For God so loved the world," reads John 3:16, "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That is the gospel in a nutshell. And it's either true or false.

The gospel does not enjoy a middle category immune from truth or falsehood, to be accepted only through a blind leap of faith. The gospel is a set of propositions about human history and ultimate reality. And it's not morally neutral. The gospel forces a decision, calling for repentance and faith in Christ. There is no middle ground. Every person must navigate the intellectual landscape between the competing worldviews of Jesus or Nothing.

If you are a Christian weighed down with uncertainty, or if you are a skeptic and you reject the claims of Jesus altogether, I hope you are willing to spend some time and invest the energy to consider the tale of these two stories. I know it would be the height of all hubris to think one short book could undo someone's deep-seated doubts. But what if your doubts are wrong?

The Wager between the Story Lines

This touches at the core of Pascal's famous "wager." Blaise Pascal was a seventeenth-century French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher. He is best remembered by the formula he framed for weighing the outcomes of belief or lack thereof. Pascal's wager offered two categorical options for humanity. And as a mathematician, Pascal ran the numbers and offered a basic conclusion: believing in God makes sense.

Consider this, if a Christian is wrong about the existence of a personal God, in death he or she will not know it. If the atheist is wrong and God does exist, then he or she will be fully aware of this error beyond the grave.

If it were a bet, the logical decision would be to believe in God. But most reasonable people don't want to gamble with issues as big as life, death, and eternity. Before you quickly dismiss Pascal's theory, however, you should understand that he was not looking for some kind of cheap religion.

Pascal is often criticized for making faith—as revealed in his wager—appear easy or flippant. Yet this is not at all the case. A complete reading of his work *Pensées*, French for "thoughts," clearly demonstrates that he considered deeply the issues of pleasure. Yet, like C. S. Lewis after him, he understood that the trouble with our desires is simply that they are too small. For Pascal, the gospel offers greater joy than can be found in earthly pursuits. And he was willing to stake his life on it.

“Pascal’s argument should never be offered as a proof for God’s existence,” says Ravi Zacharias, “or as a reason for belief in him. This was never Pascal’s intention.”⁸ Zacharias contends that Pascal’s wager is one of the most misunderstood arguments in Christian apologetics. Pascal had a simple goal, according to Zacharias: “to meet only one challenge of atheism, and that is the test of existential self-fulfillment.”⁹

Pascal’s thoughts are all too often misconstrued, in my opinion, because they are considered in light of modern evangelistic gimmicks. I understand why some would consider the wager a call for mere intellectual assent, a philosophical version of the sinner’s prayer—as if to say, “Just repeat after me and you’ll be okay.”

That’s really not what Pascal had in mind though. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides a helpful clarification for such misunderstandings: “What Pascal intends by ‘wagering for God’ is an ongoing action—indeed, one that continues until your death—that involves your adopting a certain set of practices and living the kind of life that fosters belief in God.”¹⁰

Pascal sought to demonstrate the power of the gospel to meet the human need for purpose and significance—and if true—to offer a great deal more. He was calling people to make a lifelong commitment to God that he believed would provide existential value for the human experience here and now and eternal value in the life to come.

This argument is far from a slam dunk with skeptics,

however. Giving up earthly pleasures for the sake of heavenly promises is not a trivial matter. Zach once asked me if my life is any different because I am a believer. A Christian student sitting nearby laughed and said, "Well, I certainly hope so!" The point Zach was making was much bigger than I even recognized at the time. And I didn't want to dismiss it as quickly as our friend did.

Zach was right. There is a moral component to believing in Jesus—it places a person firmly beneath a moral law with a moral Judge. This requires the denial of certain pleasures, and Zach's point was simply that becoming a Christian was not a morally neutral decision. If Christianity is false, then the believer has lived within a set of unnecessary constraints. In sum, as a Christian, I'm betting that my faith will yield a better return than forbidden fruit.

It's been over three centuries since Pascal's death, yet his arguments continue to permeate contemporary discussions about faith. It seems as though he touched a nerve that's still twitching beneath the surface of the human experience today. That's why I will borrow from his thoughts throughout the book.

Pascal's approach, however, is not uniquely religious. Singer and songwriter John Lennon once asked us to wager that God doesn't exist. He asked us to imagine a world without a heaven or a hell. Lennon offered a vision of an atheistic utopia. In the spirit of Pascal, I want to invert Lennon's request and invite you to consider what the world looks like when viewed through the lens of the gospel.

The gospel is the theist's guide to reality.

The following chapters will follow a simple pattern. I want to use the book of Colossians to contrast a gospel vision of the world with an atheistic one. I hope to show how Paul's short letter to a young church in a secular context addresses the basic questions common to humanity.

This book is neither a Bible commentary nor a philosophical treatise. Both my limited treatment of the biblical text and my broad description of atheism will surely elicit critiques. Yet, I have sought to be fair in my understanding of both. And I am convinced that life really boils down to these two categories. It's either the ball or the cross. It's either Jesus or Nothing.

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IT'S TIME TO MAKE A CHOICE

Many young adults are abandoning the Christian faith, convinced that it's an outdated and uneducated belief system. Dan DeWitt counters these misconceptions and challenges us to think carefully about the choice between *Jesus* and *nothing* by comparing the Christian worldview with the notion of a godless universe devoid of true goodness and ultimate significance.

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Denny Burk, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Boyce College; author, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?*

“In a culture where it can feel like Christianity is on the defensive, Dan reminds us that the gospel is beautiful beyond reason and completely reasonable.”

Andrew Peterson, singer/songwriter; author, *The Wingfeather Saga* series

“Atheism is often portrayed as the only intelligent worldview, but this book dispels the fog of that myth. I heartily recommend *Jesus or Nothing* to anyone struggling to sort through the shrill, confusing voices trying to tell us what matters most.”

Ted Cabal, General Editor, *The Apologetics Study Bible*

Dan DeWitt (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the dean of Boyce College, the undergraduate school of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he teaches courses on worldview, philosophy, apologetics, and C. S. Lewis. He blogs regularly at theolatte.com.

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