

PASCAL'S WAGER

“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” (Eccl. 12:13)

Blaise Pascal was a famous French mathematician, inventor, and theologian. He was born June 19, 1623 and died Aug. 19, 1662. He was a brilliant child prodigy, who was educated by his father. At the age of 16 he wrote a profound treatise on geometry that revolutionized economics and social science. In 1642, while still a teen ager, he did pioneering work on calculating machines. After three years he produced 50 prototypes and finished 20 machines.

His mathematical brilliance enabled him to reduce gambling to a science. As you know, professional gambling devices are calibrated in such a way that the “house” will always be the ultimate winner. Pascal understood this and even invented the roulette wheel.

In 1654, however, Pascal had a profound religious experience and devoted himself to God. He was in poor health for most of his life and died just two months after his 39th birthday. With the ever present thought of death he came up with what has been called, “Pascal’s Wager”. He argued that a “rational” person should seek to believe in God and live his life as if God existed. He reasoned that if there is no God, such a person would only suffer a finite loss. If God does exist, however, the “believer” will be blessed with an eternal reward. He concluded that since there are only two possibilities, heads or tails, it is not wise to wager eternal happiness for temporary pleasures.

Here is a brief outline of his thinking.

1. You must wager! It is not optional! You did not ask to be born, but you were. You do not want to die, but you will. You must wager one way or the other.
2. A rational person will weigh the options of what you have to gain, against what you have to lose. If you die and find there is no God you lose nothing. If you die and find there a God you lose everything.
3. He concluded, therefore, that without hesitation everyone should wager everything on God. Our risks of gain and loss are not equal. It is foolish to gamble so much to gain so little.
4. For those who do not believe, Pascal recommended a search for evidence. The consequences are too important to do otherwise. Even after evidence is secured, however, he knew that belief in God was still not a mathematical certainty. He knew that believing in God and not believing in God are both a gamble. Pascal was confident, however, that believing in God was the better gamble.
5. Today juries are charged with weighing the evidence and reaching a verdict “beyond a reasonable doubt”. Many things are “possible” that are not “reasonable”. The book of Romans teaches that to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice is a “reasonable” thing to do (Rom. 12:1). The word translated as “reasonable” in the KJV is “logikos”, from which we get the word “logical”. Presenting ourselves to God is “logical”. Worshiping and idol is not “logical”. Isaiah made fun of idolaters by pointing out that they cut down a tree and use part of it to make an idol to worship, and the rest to build a fire to bake bread (Is. 44:14 – 20). What if the idolater got it backward and burned his god and worshiped his fire wood? Idolatry is not reasonable!

Our text from Ecclesiastes was written by a “teacher” who was the son of King David, and also the King over Israel in Jerusalem (Eccl. 1:1, 12). This means that the “teacher” who wrote Ecclesiastes was King Solomon. The word Ecclesiastes comes from the Hebrew word “Kohelah” which means “teacher” or “preacher”. So wise King Solomon shares some of his wisdom in this inspired book.

As a king with unlimited wealth and authority Solomon denied himself no thing his eyes desired and no pleasure his heart craved (Eccl. 2:10). The whole book of Ecclesiastes describes in detail his unlimited accumulation of wealth and his unlimited experience of pleasure. The last two verses, however, describe his “conclusion”. **TO FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN!**

Which way will you wager? Will you gamble on God, or risk it all on the hope that the design of the universe has no Designer. Remember! It is the fool that says in his heart there is no God!