Part 10: Series Conclusion
Now at the end of our 10-week study on the life and writings of Blaise Pascal, perhaps, like me, you resonate with Nebraska’s Pulitzer Prize winner, Willa Cather, who wrote in *My Ántonia*: “We left the classroom quietly, conscious that we had been brushed by the wing of a great feeling.” Our journey has taken us into the mind of a true genius. Os Guinness called him “one of the supreme human thinkers of all time.” Some of his *Pensées*, as biographer Morris Bishop reminds us, “are incomprehensible; some are common-place memoranda; some are fragments of dialogue, imaginary conversations with adversaries; some are careful developments, pages long, of an aspect of his thought; some are lyric outbursts, forever memorable and unforgotten.” But whatever else may be said, Pascal’s thoughts were large.
“As they stand,” writes Pascal scholar Douglas Groothuis, “the many absorbing and arresting fragments of the *Pensées* furnish us with raw materials for an intellectual adventure concerning our uneasy place in an often perplexing cosmos and culture.” With almost 1,000 (993) *Pensées* on which to reflect and meditate, one can easily see why Os Guinness considered it a “privilege to read Pascal almost every year for nearly thirty years, and there are four reasons why I keep on coming back with never a thought of staleness.”

Douglas Groothuis, PhD
Philosophy Professor
Denver Theological Seminary
Introduction

Having considered Pascal’s *Night of Fire*, his thoughts on *Indifference, Vanity, Wretchedness, Diversion, Doubt*, and his *Wager*, we now conclude this series by examining his apologetic method, his presuppositions, his understanding of the gospel, his conclusive answer to the plight of mankind, his last days, death, and legacy.
Pascal’s Apologetic Method

1. **He Uses Converging Arguments**: “Pascal’s method is deliberately not linear, and consists of converging arguments, all directed to the same end but with different starting points” (Krailsheimer).

2. **He Exposes the Diversions of Man** (10/167; 11/246).

3. **He Challenges Man to Find Truth**. “I should therefore like to arouse in man the desire to find truth, to be ready, free from passion, to follow it wherever he may find it, realizing how far his knowledge is clouded by passions. I should like him to hate his concupiscence (intense desire for the things of this world) which automatically makes his decisions for him, so that it should not blind him when he makes his choice, nor hinder him once he has chosen” (119/423).
“For is it not true that we hate the truth and those who tell it to us?”

- Pensée 978/100
The Longing of True Seekers

• “I can only approve of those who seek with groans” (405/421).
• “What did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides. I preferred to die rather than live without that truth” (Simone Weil).
• “I have an extremely severe standard for intellectual honesty, so severe that I never met anyone who did not seem to fall short of it in more than one respect; and I am always afraid of failing in it myself” (Weil).
• “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).
“True seekers are looking for something. They are people for whom life, or a part of life, has suddenly become a point of wonder, a question, a problem, or a crisis. This happens so intensely that they are stirred to look for an answer beyond their present answers and to clarify their position in life. However the need arises, and whatever it calls for, the sense of need consumes the searchers and launches them on their quest.”

Os Guinness, DPhil, Oxford
1941 -
Pascal’s Apologetic Method

4. **He Begins with Man.** “Instead of proceeding from religion to man, he would go from man to religion. He would write the drama of the soul in search of truth, the intellectual’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He would answer the question: ‘What is this life, and what are we doing here?’ by the proofs that we find in the contemplation of our own spirits. Christianity would enter his argument as an explanation of life” (Bishop).

5. **He Appeals to First Principles** (the intuitive mind): “We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the later that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them” (110/282).
Pascal’s Apologetic Method

6. He Appeals to the Human Predicament. Here are a few of the things he finds by holding up the mirror to man: Men are weak, frivolous, selfish, and vain. He sees malice, treachery, and the corruption of the soul. Reason and the senses are insincere. In order to be happy, men refuse to think about eternal matters and commonly use diversionary tactics. Man’s actions are determined by self-interest. Man wants to be known and famous and will do anything for the applause of others. Man is wretched, has a moral hatred for the truth, and devotes all of his time hiding his own imperfections from others and from himself. Friendships are founded on mutual deception. Man avoids the truth and so appeals to the imagination to create a dream world. Deeper still, Pascal finds “evil in his marrow and venom in his blood” (Bishop).
Pascal’s Apologetic Method

7. **He Emphasizes the High Stakes Involved** (e.g., the Wager).

8. **He Champions the Limitations of Reason.** “If we submit everything to reason our religion will be left with nothing mysterious or supernatural. If we offend the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous” (173/273).

9. **He Maintains that Christianity Has a Claim on the Whole Personality of Man, Not Just His Intellect.**

10. **He Claims That Principles Are Felt and Propositions Proved.** “It is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them” (110/282).
11. He Never Attempts to Prove the Existence of God Apart from Divine Revelation. “The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake” (190/543).

12. He Is Thoroughly Christocentric. “It is not only impossible but useless to know God without Christ” (191/549).
Pascal’s Presuppositions

• **Men Despise Religion.** “They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next, make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is” (12/187).

• **The World Is Vain.** The vanity of the world is obvious and so little recognized (16/161). “Anyone who does not see the vanity of the world is very vain himself” (36/164).

• **Man’s Condition.** “Inconstancy (fickleness), boredom, anxiety” (24/127). “But take away their diversion and you will see them bored to extinction” (36/164).
Pascal’s Presuppositions

• **Man Is Weak.** “Nothing is surer than that the people will be weak” (26/330). “What amazes me most is to see that everyone is not amazed at his own weakness” (33/374).

• **Man Is Full of Error.** “Man is nothing but a subject full of natural error that cannot be eradicated except through grace” (45/83).

• **Man Is Deceived.** “The two principles of truth – reason and senses – are not only both not genuine, but are engaged in mutual deception. The senses deceive reason through false appearances, and just as they trick the soul, they are tricked by it in their turn: it takes revenge. The senses are disturbed by passions, which produce false impressions. They both compete in lies and deception” (45/83).
Pascal’s Presuppositions

• **Man Is Self-Centered.** “Men are wholly occupied in pursuing their good” (28/436). “Man wants to be happy, only wants to be happy, and cannot help wanting to be happy” (134/168).

• **Man Focuses on the Future.** “The past and present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so” (47/172).

• **Man Is Wretched.** “Man is vile enough to bow down to beasts and even worship them” (53/429). “If our condition were truly happy, we should not need to divert ourselves from thinking about it” (70/165). Man is “wretched without God; nature is corrupt” (6/60). “We have an idea of happiness, but we cannot attain it” (131/434).
Pascal’s Presuppositions

• **Man Is Great.** “Man’s greatness is so obvious that it can even be deduced from his wretchedness, for what is nature in animals we call wretchedness in man, thus recognizing that, if his nature is today like that of the animals, he must have fallen from some better state which was once his own” (117/409). Man “is great and beyond compare” (127/415).

• **There Are No Genuine Sceptics.** “I maintain that a perfectly genuine sceptic has never existed. Nature backs up helpless reason and stops it going so wildly astray” (131/434).
Pascal’s Presuppositions

• **Man’s Greatness and Wretchedness.** “It is certain that as man’s insight increases so he finds both wretchedness and greatness within himself” (122/416). “Man’s greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness” (149/430).

• **Man Avoids Reality.** “We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it” (166/183).
• **How Man Knows Truth.** “We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them....Knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument” (110/282).

• **Men Are Mad.** “Men are so inevitably mad that not to be mad would be to give a mad twist to madness” (412/414).
Pascal’s Presuppositions

• **Where Truth May Be Found.** “Truth lies beyond our scope and is an unattainable quarry, that it is no earthly denizen, but at home in heaven, lying in the lap of God, to be known only in so far as it pleases him to reveal it….Listen to God.” (131/434).

• **The Federal Headship of Adam.** “Without doubt nothing is more shocking to our reason than to say that the sin of the first man (Adam) has implicated in its guilt men so far from the original sin that they seem incapable of sharing it” (131/434).

• **Man’s Restlessness.** “I have often said that the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room” (136/139).
• **A Necessary Being.** “I feel that it is possible that I might never have existed, for my self consists in my thought; therefore I who think would never have been if my mother had been killed before I had come to life; therefore, I am not a necessary being. I am not eternal or infinite either, but I can see that there is in nature a being who is necessary, eternal, and infinite” (135/469). “Everything that is incomprehensible does not cease to exist” (149/430).

• **The Right Way.** “The right way is to want what God wants. Christ alone leads to it” (140/466).
What Pascal Teaches Regarding Salvation

**Temporal & Saving Faith.** God puts faith in our hearts (7/248). “That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving in their hearts are very fortunate, and feel quite legitimately convinced, but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation” (110/282).

**Grace.** “Whence it is clearly evident that man through grace is made like unto God and shares his divinity, and without grace he is treated like the beasts of the field” (131/434). “If you are united to God, it is by grace, and not by nature” (149/430).
What Pascal Teaches Regarding Salvation

• A God-Shaped Vacuum. “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself” (148/428).
What Pascal Teaches Regarding Salvation

• Three Sorts of People. “There are only three sorts of people: those who have found God and serve him; those who are busy seeking him and have not found him; those who live without either seeking or finding him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy, those in the middle are unhappy and reasonable” (16/257).

• Three Kinds of Knowing. “Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness” (192/527).
• **How We Know God.** “We know God only through Jesus Christ. Without this mediator all communication with God is broken off. Through Jesus we know God....This God is nothing less than our redeemer from wretchedness” (189/547).

• **Impossible & Useless.** “It is not only impossible but useless to know God without Christ” (191/549).

• **Approaching Jesus.** “Jesus is a God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair” (212/528).
What Pascal Teaches Regarding Salvation

• **Why Jesus Came.** “Jesus came to blind those who have clear sight and to give sight to the blind; to heal the sick and let the healthy die; to call sinners to repentance and justify them, and to leave the righteous to their sins; to fill the hungry with good things and to send the empty away” (235/771).

• **What Jesus Taught.** “All Jesus did was to teach men that they loved themselves, that they were slaves, blind, sick, unhappy and sinful, that he had to deliver, enlighten, sanctify and heal them, that this would be achieved by men hating themselves and following him through his misery and death on the Cross” (271/545).
• **Jesus Christ & Knowing.** “Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves. Thus without Scripture, whose only object is Christ, we know nothing, and can see nothing but obscurity and confusion in the nature of God and in nature itself” (417/548).
Pascal’s Summary of the Gospel

Christianity “properly consists in the mystery of the Redeemer, who, uniting in himself the two natures, human and divine, saved men from the corruption of sin in order to reconcile them with God in his divine person.

It teaches men then these two truths alike: that there is a God, of whom men are capable, and that there is a corruption in nature which makes them unworthy. It is of equal importance to men to know each of these points: and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can cure him.
Knowing only one of these points leads either to the arrogance of the philosophers, who have known God but not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of the atheists, who know their own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer....Let us go on to examine the order of the world, and see whether all things do not tend to establish the two main tenets of this religion: Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the center towards which all things tend. Whoever knows him knows the reason for everything....It is then perfectly possible to know God but not our own wretchedness, or our own wretchedness but not God; but it is not possible to know Christ without knowing both God and our wretchedness alike” (449/556).
Pascal’s Last Days and Death

• **June 29, 1662**: Pascal fell violently ill

• **July 2**: He was attacked by a raging colic, which left him sleepless; he was bled at least five times from the arms and was treated with purges, enemas, and emetics (provoking vomiting).

• His situation lightened for a time; he made his will, providing for his sister, his nephew Etienne, and for his servants, past and present.

• **August 14**: Pascal experienced great dizziness, with terrible pains in his head.

• **August 19, 1662**: Pascal died at 1:00 a.m. at 39 years & 2 months.
“Pascal’s death agony represents the slow corruption of the flesh, poisoning even the mind until little is left to snatch away. His spirit, however, rallied at the last, and he died on 19 August 1662, lucid and happy to be finally united with his Savior.”
Pascal’s Autopsy

The stomach and liver were found in bad condition, and the intestines had become gangrenous. The brain was very full of solid, condensed gray matter. Pascal had died of a hemorrhage of the brain. “The mind, the great mind, was poisoned by the corruption of the blood, the corruption of life.”
Pascal Buried on August 21, 1662
St. Étienne du Mont
Paris, France

The Body Of
BLAISE PASCAL
Died on 19 August 1662
In This Parish Of
Saint Etienne du Mont
Has Been Buried
Near This pillar
R.I. P.
Pascal Statue by Jules Cavelier, 1857
St. Jacques Tower, Paris

Pascal by Jean-Baptiste Claude Eugene Guillaume, 1879
Clermont-Ferrand, France
The scattered papers at Pascal's feet are the *Pensées*
The open book is *The Provincial Letters*
The cycloid is engraved on the tablet in his left hand
“What Pascal bequeathed us as a permanent possession is, in Abbé Steinmann’s words, the invaluable ‘inventory of the eternal problems’ that he drew up. Also, his incomparable picture of man – ourselves – confronting an empty, silent and illimitable universe, in which the only choices before man are this emptiness and the crucified Christ. This being so, perhaps it is fitting that the only certain likeness we have of Pascal is his death mask.”