

Inside Life

Issue 25
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The God Who Does NOT Exist

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Inside Life

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Inside Life is a magazine of understanding. Rather than just reporting on life, **Inside Life** seeks to delve inside the marvellous mystery that is life, to discover what it is all about. What does life mean? Where did it come from? How can we make the most of it?

Inside Life provides insight and answers to life’s deep questions and challenges, and aims to provide articles of lasting hope, help, and encouragement for successful living in today’s fast-moving world.

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Our Cover: This dramatic image offers a peek inside a cavern of roiling dust and gas where thousands of stars are forming. The image, taken by the Advanced Camera for Surveys (ACS) aboard NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope, represents the sharpest view ever taken of this region, called the Orion Nebula. More than 3,000 stars of various sizes appear in this image. Some of them have never been seen in visible light. These stars reside in a dramatic dust-and-gas landscape of plateaus, mountains, and valleys that are reminiscent of the Grand Canyon.

The Orion Nebula is 1,500 light-years away, the nearest star-forming region to Earth, and a picture book of star formation, from the massive, young stars that are shaping the nebula to the pillars of dense gas that may be the homes of budding stars.

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Before the “Big Bang”

By Rex Morgan

As I look up at the night sky from my home in Auckland, I am often moved to gasp with awe at the magnificence of the star-studded expanse stretched out above me. When I have the chance to view it from the remoteness of the countryside, the sight is even more awesome.

But of course the stars we can see with the naked eye only represent an infinitesimally tiny fraction of what is actually there. All we can see are some of the closest stars of our own galaxy, the Milky Way. Beyond this are literally billions of other galaxies! Immense words like “billions” trip easily off the tongues of astronomers

involved in the study of the vastness of outer space. Measurements describing the sizes, temperatures, and distances between heavenly bodies, including such phenomena as comets, nebulae, quasars, and black holes, involving figures that boggle the mind.

The distances are so great that it would be ridiculous for astronomers to measure them in kilometres. Rather, they speak in terms of light years, referring to the distance light can travel in a year, around 9.5 trillion kilometres. Using this enormous unit of measurement, our Milky Way is a spiral galaxy about 100,000 light years in diameter, containing an estimated 200 billion stars and 100 billion planets. The sun takes 240 million years to make

one orbit around the centre of the Milky Way. Figures of this magnitude are difficult for the average person to come to grips with, yet we are only talking about our galaxy, one amongst billions of others!

Photos taken from the Hubble Space Telescope indicate there are more than 100 billion galaxies. To give some idea of the meaning of numbers like these, if you were to count galaxies at the rate of one per second, you would take over 300 years to reach 100 billion. What a massive and magnificent universe we live in!

The origin of the universe

Have you ever wondered where all of this came from?

In the centre of the image is the immense galaxy cluster Abell S1063, located four billion light-years away, and surrounded by magnified images of galaxies much farther. Already, an infant galaxy has been found in the field, as it looked 1 billion years after the Big Bang.





Scientists have concluded that the universe began as an explosion of space and matter, starting from an enormously dense and hot state.

Astronomers and cosmologists have grappled with this question for centuries. Prior to the 1980s, the prevailing view was that the universe had always existed, in a stable so-called “steady state”. However the equations of Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity in the early 1900s implied that it wasn’t constant, but was either expanding or contracting. In 1927 Georges Lemaître proposed that the universe was expanding. This was proved to be true just two years later, when Edwin Hubble discovered that the universe is continuously expanding in every direction, and that the further away a galaxy is, the faster it moves away from us.

This means the galaxies were closer together in the past—in fact they all started from the same place. This led scientists to conclude that the universe began as an explosion of space and matter, starting from an enormously dense and hot state when all the matter and energy in the universe was concentrated in a tiny

space, known as a “singularity”. This explosion, known as the “Big Bang”, occurred about 13.8 billion years ago, according to data obtained in 2003 by the NASA satellite WMAP. The vast majority of scientists agree with the Big Bang model, and the picture is constantly being updated and fine-tuned as more research is done.

For instance, early Big Bang theorists predicted the existence of cosmic background radiation, the glow left over from the explosion. This radiation was actually discovered in 1964, providing powerful confirmation of the theory.

In 1992 the Cosmic Background Explorer (COBE) satellite made global headlines when it observed tiny ripples in the cosmic radiation, capable of giving rise to the clumps of hot matter that formed into galaxies. George Smoot, COBE project leader, referred to these fluctuations as “the fingerprints from

the Maker” and stated: “What we found is evidence for the birth of the universe”.¹ Renowned scientist Stephen Hawking declared this to be the “discovery of the century, if not all time”.²

In June 1995 scientists detected primordial helium in the far reaches of the universe, consistent with an important aspect of the Big Bang theory that a mixture of hydrogen and helium was created at the beginning of the universe.

On 11 February 2016 the LIGO³ research team for the first time ever observed gravitational waves, something predicted by Einstein in 1915. This provides further proof of Einstein’s theory of general relativity, the basis of the Big Bang model.

Professor Paul Dirac, a leading physicist and Nobel laureate who is also an avowed atheist, has gone so far as to state: “It is certain that the universe began at a definite time through an act of creation.”⁴

Can something come from nothing?

Supposing scientists are right, and the universe began with a huge explosion, this begs the question: “What caused the Big Bang?”

Robert Jastrow, founding director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, says in his book *God and the Astronomers*:

Consider the enormity of the problem. Science has proven that the universe exploded into being at a certain moment. It asks: “What cause produced this effect? Who or what put the matter and energy into the universe? Was the universe created out of nothing, or was it gathered together out of pre-existing materials?” And science cannot answer these questions...⁵

Cosmologists’ observations cannot reach back to the time before the Big Bang. But the question must be asked: Where did the matter and energy released in the Big Bang come from? If there was nothing in existence before the Big Bang, how could something have come from nothing?

Imagine a world in which there is nothing—absolutely nothing at all in existence anywhere. Now ask yourself: Is it possible for anything to come out of nothing? Such an occurrence would defy the universal law of cause and effect. If things were able to appear from nothing, we would always be subject to surprises! Clearly, if there was a time when there was nothing, there would still be nothing!

Since it is impossible for something to come from nothing, there are just two alternatives: either the universe has always existed, or it was produced by a separate agent that was already in existence.

The first of these alternatives is ruled out by the Big Bang model, as well as by other evidence. For instance, the second law of thermodynamics, one of the most fundamental laws of physics, states that order always gives way to disorder over time: cars wear out, buildings fall down, people grow old, and so on. There must have been a beginning or the universe would be in a state of complete disorder by now, according to Stephen Hawking.⁶

A further factor showing the universe had to have a beginning was the discovery in 1898 of the radioactive decay of certain elements. This means that these elements could not be infinitely old, or they would have already turned to lead. There must have been a time when radioactive materials came into existence.

Since the universe hasn’t always existed, we are left with the second alternative, that it must have been generated by a separate agent that was already in existence.

Here is where the Christian Bible offers some telling input, with its simple and authoritative opening words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”.⁷ And in view of this theory that the world began with a flash of energy and light, it is fascinating that God’s first recorded words are “Let there be light”.⁸

A “fine-tuned” universe

In recent years scientists have been discovering that the universe bears many marks of being fine-tuned so that life as we know it can exist.

The earth is located just the right distance from the sun to enable life as we know it.



For example, it so happens that the earth is located just the right distance from the sun. If it were only fractionally, say around 2%, further away, we would all freeze. If it were as little as 2% closer, we would all burn up.⁹

It so happens also that the earth moves at just the right speed. If it moved just a little faster in its orbit around the sun, the centrifugal force would hurl us away to our destruction like a stone from a slingshot. If it travelled only slightly more slowly, the sun's massive gravity would draw our planet closer, causing the extinction of all life.

The size of the earth is just right, too. Its corresponding gravity enables a thin layer of gases, mostly nitrogen and oxygen, to form our atmosphere—just the right mixture of gases to sustain life. If our planet were only a little larger, hydrogen would be unable to escape the atmosphere, making it inhospitable

to life. If the earth was a little smaller, oxygen would escape and water would evaporate.

Looking at the universe as a whole, a number of fundamental forces, or laws of nature, make it what it is. One is the force of gravity, which happens to be at just the right strength. If it were stronger, the stars would be so hot they would burn out, but if it were weaker, they wouldn't become hot enough to ignite nuclear fusion, and no planets would have been formed.

Another mark of our finely tuned universe is the strong nuclear force, which binds protons and neutrons within the nuclei of atoms. If it were any more than about 1% weaker, protons and neutrons wouldn't stick together, resulting in the existence of only one element in the universe, hydrogen, and life would be impossible. But if the strong nuclear force were slightly stronger, there would be no hydrogen, and therefore no life.

There are many other such characteristics that are just right for life to be possible. One is the ratio of the gravitational force constant to the electromagnetic force constant. This cannot differ from its value by any more than one part in 10^{40} (one part in ten thousand trillion trillion trillion) without eliminating the possibility for life.¹⁰

Concepts like these are difficult for the average layman to follow and understand, so let's note what the expert scientists have to say about them.

Physicist Dr Robin Collins says:

Over the past 30 years or so, scientists have discovered that just about everything about the basic structure of the universe is balanced on a razor's edge for life to exist. The coincidences are far too fantastic to attribute this to mere chance or to claim that it needs no explanation. The dials are set too precisely to have been a random accident.¹¹

Commenting on the multiple forces and parameters of the universe that are "just right", Stephen Hawking observed:

The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life.¹²

Hawking also said:

The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big Bang are enormous....I think clearly there are religious implications whenever you start to discuss the origins of the universe.¹³

He quantified the odds with this astonishing statement in his bestseller *A Brief History of Time*:

If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, the Universe would have re-collapsed before it ever reached its present state.¹⁴



Whether we look up into the outer space of the world above us, or down into the inner space of the world around us, we are moved to marvel at what a massive and magnificent universe we live in!

Although he states that he remains firmly an atheist, Hawking is reported as conceding in March 2015 that a “God-like force” played a role in the creation of the universe.¹⁵

Even the renowned atheist Fred Hoyle famously stated:

A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature. The numbers one calculates from the facts seem to me so overwhelming as to put this conclusion almost beyond question.¹⁶

Celebrated British cosmologist Martin Rees, who has been Astronomer Royal since 1995, wrote that if the six numbers that underlie the fundamental physical properties of the universe were altered “even to the tiniest degree, there would be no stars, no complex elements, no life”.¹⁷

Astrophysicist Dr Hugh Ross has catalogued 38 cosmic characteristics that must have values falling within narrowly defined ranges for life of any kind to exist.¹⁸ Noted physicist Paul Davies remarked:

It seems as though somebody has fine-tuned nature’s numbers to make the universe... The impression of design is overwhelming.¹⁹

When we replace the telescope with a microscope and look into the inner world, the same breathtaking complexity again astounds us. For instance, one molecule of human DNA, far too tiny to be seen by the naked eye, comprises an intricate spiralling ladder with about 100 million twists, and about 100 billion atoms. The human eye looking into the microscope contains 40 different mechanisms, such as a lens, a pupil, and a retina, and is made up of 130 million cells. And is there anything more marvellous than the human brain, which processes more than a million messages every second?

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Whether we look up into the outer space of the world above us, or down into the inner space of the world around us, we are moved to marvel at what a massive and magnificent universe we live in!

Did this mind-boggling display of awesome intricacy so perfectly tailored for life on earth all begin with a haphazard, arbitrary explosion that subsequently developed brilliantly into the remarkably precise mosaic of marvels we see all around us? Could all of this creation, crowned by the supreme masterpiece of the conscious human being, really have developed by sheer accident, by blind chance, from absolutely nothing? Doesn’t that call for even more faith than is required to believe in God?

One theory advanced by biblical sceptics to account for the fine-tuning of the universe is the multiverse hypothesis. This proposes that there is a multiplicity of universes, and in that case it is no surprise that the right conditions for life would exist, because with an infinite number of universes this is bound to happen in at least one of them. But there is

absolutely no evidence that there is another physical universe. And even if there were a multiverse, the question would still remain: where did it come from?

We saw earlier that the evidence points to the universe being generated by a separate agent already in existence, and we noted that the Bible offers input in this area.

A number of Biblical writers speak of the origin of the universe. For instance, the book of Psalms says: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands”.²⁰

Written perhaps 3,500 years ago, the book of Job describes the greatness of God:

He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south.²¹

The ancient prophet Jeremiah described it this way:

He made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his

wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.²²

Another prophet, Isaiah, stated: “He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in”.²³

The passages above, along with many others²⁴ refer to God “stretching out” the heavens like a curtain or a tent. How remarkably similar to the image cited by today’s cosmologists, who describe the expansion of the universe by inflation after the Big Bang as being like the expansion that occurs as a rubber band or a balloon stretches out.²⁵

Where did God come from?

In response to these assertions, the question has been asked: But where did God come from? It’s a fair question, and should be carefully considered.

The Bible answers that God is eternal, declaring that he was in existence “before the beginning of time”.²⁶

It’s hard for us to comprehend something that is eternal, because we live in a material, physical world, and we naturally think of everything as being physical. Because of their temporary nature, all physical things have a beginning and an ending, and they all deteriorate over time. The Big Bang model shows that the entire universe falls into this category.

But according to the Bible, there is also a spiritual dimension which God inhabits. The Bible states that “God is spirit”,²⁷ that he “inhabits eternity”,²⁸ and is “invisible, immortal and eternal”,²⁹ “having no beginning or ending”.³⁰ This is because God lives outside the constraints of time and space, in a different level of existence, the spirit realm. When he created the universe, and the material world sprang into existence, time and space began.³¹

We know that if there was a time when there was nothing, there

would still be nothing. But there is something! Things do exist. Therefore something always had to be in existence. That ever-existing or self-existent agent is God. And that is precisely what he reveals himself to be in the Bible, giving his name as simply “I Am”,³² or the self-existent one.

Christians cannot absolutely prove to unbelievers that God exists. The Bible itself says that this is something they must accept by faith.³³ But they do have a wealth of reasonable evidence on which to base that faith.

Only things that have a beginning need to be created. The universe had a beginning, and scientists have tracked that down to the Big Bang. So the universe had to be created, but God didn’t, because he has always been there, living in the spirit realm, outside the confines of space and time.

Science is unable to probe back beyond the beginning of time at the Big Bang, but the Bible boldly declares that the eternal God was there before the Big Bang!

Notes

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- 2 Nigel Hawkes, “Hunt on for Dark Secret of Universe”, *London Times*, 25 April 1992, p.1.
- 3 LIGO stands for the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory.
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- 7 Genesis 1:1.
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- 24 Psalms 104:1–2; Isaiah 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13; Jeremiah 10:12; Zechariah 12:1.
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- 27 John 4:24.
- 28 Isaiah 57:15 (NKJV).
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- 32 Exodus 3:14.
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The Pinocchio Effect

By Joseph Tkach

Do you remember the character Pinocchio? The wooden puppet whose nose would grow longer every time he told a lie? Well, that story may not actually be as far-fetched as it may seem.

Researchers from the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Granada in Spain have discovered that when a person tells a lie, there is an increase in the temperature around their nose and in the orbital muscle in the inner corner of their eyes. They are, of course, calling it the Pinocchio Effect.

Researchers at the University of Notre Dame performed a 10-week study and found that telling fewer lies can literally improve your health. This new research shows that when people managed to reduce their lies, they reported significantly improved physical and mental health. Notre Dame Psychology professor and lead author, Anita Kelly says: “Participants could purposefully and dramatically reduce their everyday lies, and that in turn was associated with significantly improved health. Those who reduced their lying suffered less from physical complaints such as sore throats and headaches, as well as feeling tense or melancholy”.

According to a “Science of Honesty” study, recent evidence indicates that Americans average about 11 lies per person, per week. Frankly, that seems a bit conservative. With my tongue buried deep in my cheek, I wonder if they included politicians in their research. Regardless, it does seem to be a scientific fact that lying

is a health hazard. The old saying that honesty really is the best policy, especially when it comes to your overall health and well-being, holds up in this case.

I always find it fascinating when scientific advances are touted as if some new truth has been discovered, only to find it has been revealed in the Bible many centuries ago. I like the way the Living Bible renders what the Apostle Paul wrote: “Stop lying to each other; tell the truth, for we are parts of each other and when we lie to each other we are hurting ourselves” (Ephesians 4:25).

Paul also boldly stated in a letter he wrote to Titus that it is impossible for God to lie. Our triune God is not restricted by time, space, or any physical force. As other scriptures show, with God anything is possible. But perhaps we should say: “nearly anything”. His very character has determined that he will never do some things, because to do them would be to contradict the nature of his core being. Since he created us, it follows that he really does know what is best for us. That includes telling the truth.

You may remember that Pinocchio’s great dream was to be transformed from being a wooden puppet into a real boy. Eventually this happens, and he becomes a real son to the man who made him. Again, an

interesting analogy, because God—who, remember, cannot lie—has told us that he will transform us, restoring us to whom we were meant to be. That is the truth, and I tell you this with confidence. My nose is not getting any longer.

This is a transcript of the weekly *Speaking of Life* radio programme by Joseph Tkach, President of Grace Communion International. For more information visit www.gci.org.



No More Sea...

By James Henderson

Growing up not far from the coast, I loved to hear stories about the sea.

Occasionally you'd hear of a shipwreck's masthead being uncovered in the sand, or of a relic being washed ashore. Such things fired my childish mind with wild imaginings. In particular, I liked the idea of coming across a barnacled chest full of pirate treasure, some of Shakespeare's "wedges of gold... heaps of pearl, inestimable stones, unvalu'd jewels" from "a thousand fearful wrecks".¹

A new movie, *The Finest Hours*, based on the book of the same name by Michael Tougias, was released this February and it depicts the story of a hazardous rescue attempt by the US Coast Guard in February 1952, when two separate oil tankers broke in half off Cape Cod during a severe winter storm. Other films have shown the ferocity of the sea. Perhaps you know some of them, such as *The Cruel Sea*, *The Perfect Storm*, and *The Poseidon Adventure*.

The reality of being trapped on a sinking ship, or of being adrift

at sea, not rescued, is a living terror. Survivors have written about experiencing these kinds of fears. Owen Chase, the First Mate of the whale-ship *Essex*, which sank in 1820 when it was rammed twice by a massive sperm whale, recalled how "every countenance" of those few who managed to get on the lifeboats "was marked by the paleness of despair",² and, as time went on, some of them resorted to cannibalism in order to survive the 1,000-mile stretch to the nearest land.

Other examples come to mind. A chilling account of the 1912 Titanic disaster, describes the fate of those stuck in the freezing Atlantic Ocean: "...the volume of the cries had dramatically reduced, indicating that the cold had killed or incapacitated most in the water".³

When the Soviet nuclear cruise-missile submarine *Kursk* sank 58 fathoms (350 feet or 108 metres) to the bottom of the Barents Sea in August 2000, governmental delays and inaction meant that no one helped quickly enough, and as a result, all 118 of her crew died. When the rescuers made it eventually to the ship, the full agony of what happened to some of the sailors came to light. Not all had died quickly, as the

Russian authorities had thought. Twenty-three of them spent days in a small, dark compartment near the stern of the submarine, where they suffered from hypothermia as the oxygen ran out. Using the luminosity of the hands of their watches, some scribbled notes to their friends and families. Midshipman Andrei Borisov wrote: "If you are reading this note, it means I am dead".⁴

Shipwrecks and dangerous seas have been in the news several times this year. It was with great relief that the cargo ship *Modern Express* was towed to safety in February. Its cargo appeared to have shifted in heavy seas off France, and caused the vessel to list to one side, setting it adrift for over a week.

Do you remember the March 2014 disappearance of Malaysian airliner MH370 while en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing? Over two years later there has been no sign of its 239 passengers and crew. The current plan is that, unless any clear new leads come to light, the search may be called off by the end of 2016. Our thoughts and prayers go out still to the relatives and friends of those who vanished without a trace. While searching the depths of the Southern Indian Ocean for any clue to the fate of MH370, investigation teams

have come across two previously unreported shipwrecks. The latest is of a 19th-century vessel, which was discovered using sonar equipment in January this year. What happened to the sailors and passengers involved? Were they rescued, or did they go down with the ship into the murky pages of history?

By extension we could ask about all those lost at sea since sailing began. What about those migrants and refugees who drowned last year and this when trying to flee across the Mediterranean Sea from Syria or North Africa to Europe? Or, indeed, the multiple millions who have died before them, largely forgotten now.

Is there any hope for the dead? Are they somewhere now in an alternative reality, or have they just sunk deep into obscurity, gone forever?

Different religions suggest various options (or none) about the long-term prospects of the dead. One religion, Christianity, specifically mentions the sea in a scenario of hope. It's noted in the biblical book of Revelation, which was written by Jesus' disciple, John. In envisioning the end of time as we know it, John writes that "the sea gave up the dead that were in it". Not only that but also death and the grave "gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done".⁵ Scholars debate what this means exactly, but

one thing remains certain: biblically speaking, the end of our physical life is not the end of our individual stories. Somehow we continue.

Personally, I don't like the idea of being judged according to what I have done. Do you like it? What humanity has done collectively and what many of us have done individually is not good news. There is, however, hope because John linked the idea of judgment to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.⁶ Judgment is intrinsically bound up, not so much in what we have done, but in what Jesus has done for us. On the cross of Jesus forgiveness is found for our sins, which are our bad works, the wrong actions we all have done to one degree or another.

Therefore, in Jesus there is hope for the dead and the living. That is why Christians celebrate the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus—they are our hope.

John also explained that one day there will be no longer any sea.⁷ I wonder what he meant by that. Does he mean the end of the beauty of a glorious sunset over the coasts, or the enjoyment of sailing? For my part I don't see it that way. John, I think, clarifies it as he writes: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away".⁸ No more drowning, no more

distress or hurt at sea—the cruel seas are over.

The same John who recorded the story of Christ's life and who penned the amazing book of Revelation also wrote letters to some churches he knew. In one of them he explained that this rescue of us on the cross of Jesus was not just for people who believe it to be so, but for the whole world.⁹ It means that, in the tumultuous seas of humanity, no one is missing in Christ. You and I, in fact everyone, is accounted for.

In fact, not only is there hope for us all in what Jesus has done for us, but also you could say that our being forgiven is the beginning of our finest hours...

Notes

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- ⁷ Revelation 21:1.
- ⁸ Revelation 21:4.
- ⁹ 1 John 2:2.

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Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?

By Rusty Wright

At Easter, some might wonder what all the fuss is about. Who cares? What difference does it make if Jesus rose from the dead?

It makes all the difference in the world. If Christ did not rise, then thousands of believers have died as martyrs for a hoax.

If he did rise, then he is still alive, and he can offer peace to troubled, hurting lives.

Countless scholars—among them the apostle Paul, Augustine, Sir Isaac Newton, and C.S. Lewis—have believed in the resurrection. We need not fear committing intellectual suicide by believing it also. Where do the facts lead?

Paul, a first-century skeptic-turned believer, wrote that “Christ died for our sins...he was buried...he was raised on the third day...he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (disciples). After that, he appeared to more than five hundred...at the same time, most of whom are still living...” (1 Corinthians 15:3–6). Consider four pieces of evidence.

The explosive growth of the Christian movement

Within a few weeks after Jesus was crucified, a movement arose which, by the later admission of its enemies, “upset the world”. What happened to ignite this movement shortly after its leader had been executed?

The disciples' changed lives

After Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, most of the disciples fled in fear. Peter denied three times that he was

a follower of Jesus. (The women were braver and stayed to the end.) Yet ten out of the eleven disciples (Judas committed suicide) were martyred for their faith. According to traditions, Peter was crucified upside down, Thomas was skewered, John was boiled in oil but survived. What turned these cowards into heroes? Each believed he had seen Jesus alive again.

The empty tomb

Jesus' corpse was removed from the cross, wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A one-and-a-half to two-ton stone was rolled into a slightly depressed groove to seal the tomb's entrance.

A “Green Beret”-like unit of Roman soldiers guarded the grave. Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, the body was gone, but the graveclothes were still in place. What happened?

Did Christ's friends steal the body? Perhaps one of the women sweet-talked (karate-chopped?) the guards while the others moved the stone and tiptoed off with the body. Or maybe Peter (remember his bravery) or Thomas (he is most often remembered as doubting Thomas) overpowered the guards, stole the body, then fabricated—and died for—a resurrection myth.

These theories hardly seem plausible. The guard was too powerful, the stone too heavy, and the disciples too spineless to attempt such a feat.

Did Christ's enemies steal the body? If Romans or Jewish religious leaders had the body, surely they would have exposed it publicly and

Christianity would have died out. They didn't, and it didn't.

The “Swoon Theory” supposes that Jesus didn't really die but was only unconscious. The expert Roman executioners merely thought he was dead. After a few days in the tomb without food or medicine, the cool air revived him.

He burst from the 100 pounds of grave clothes, rolled away the stone with his nail-pierced hands, scared the daylights out of the Roman soldiers, walked miles on wounded feet, and convinced his disciples he'd been raised from the dead. This one is harder to believe than the resurrection itself.

The appearances of the risen Christ

For 40 days after his death, many different people said they saw Jesus alive. Witnesses included a woman, a shrewd tax collector, several fishermen, and over 500 people at once. These claims provide further eyewitness testimony for the resurrection.

As a sceptic, I realised that attempts to explain away the evidence run into a brick wall of facts that point to one conclusion: Christ is risen.

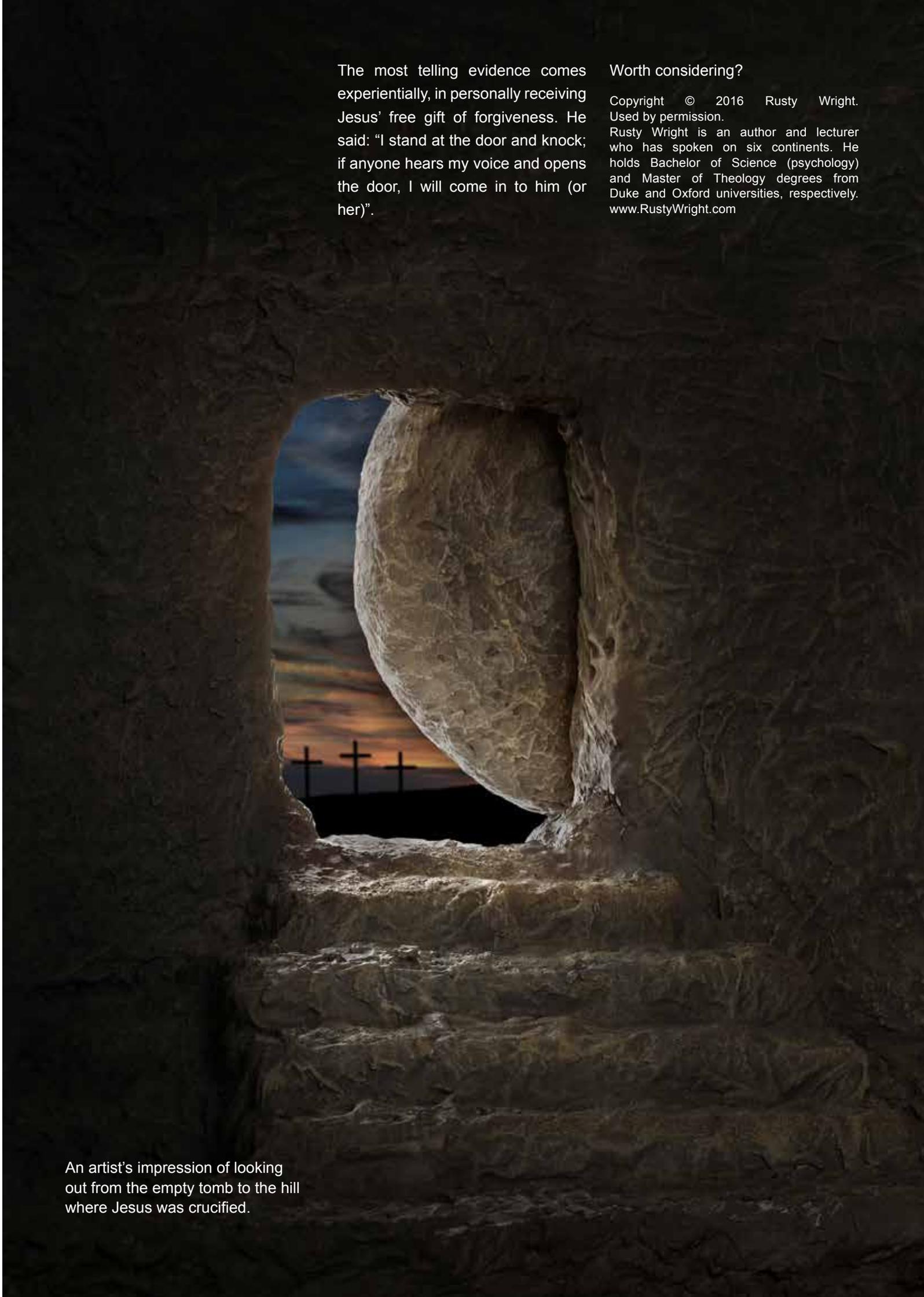
The above does not constitute an exhaustive proof, rather a reasoned examination of the evidence. Each interested person should evaluate the evidence and decide if it makes sense. Of course, the truth or falsity of the resurrection is a matter of historical fact and is not dependent on anyone's belief. If the facts support the claim, one can conclude that he arose. In any case, mere intellectual assent to the facts does little for one's life.

The most telling evidence comes experientially, in personally receiving Jesus' free gift of forgiveness. He said: "I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him (or her)".

Worth considering?

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An artist's impression of looking out from the empty tomb to the hill where Jesus was crucified. The scene is viewed through a dark, rough-hewn stone opening. A large, smooth, light-colored stone is rolled away from the entrance. In the distance, three crosses are silhouetted against a sunset sky with orange and blue hues. The foreground shows the rough, uneven stone floor of the tomb.

An artist's impression of looking out from the empty tomb to the hill where Jesus was crucified.

The God who does NOT exist



by Roy Lawrence

It is quite fashionable to be an atheist these days. If you switch on the TV and watch a drama in which one of the characters claims to be a Christian, that person will often be portrayed as brainless and bigoted.

Atheists, on the other hand, tend to be shown in a much more sympathetic way. In consequence they are often much readier to air their opinions than used to be the case.

This means that it is not uncommon for me to find myself having a discussion with someone who has little or no faith. I corresponded with one such man for over a year after he had read something I wrote. None of the following is likely to surprise you. But what may come as a surprise is that often I find myself telling unbelievers that I don't believe in the God they don't believe in either!

It seems to me that atheists often construct a totally mistaken mental image of God, and then they very properly reject this product of their own invention. They set up a sort of "Aunt Sally god", and then very properly knock it down again. I would knock it down, too. The trouble is that these people sometimes think they have disposed of the only God there is, and I find myself longing that they could have just a glimpse of who God really is, because things might change dramatically if they did.

So, although the title of this article may surprise you, it is important that we should identify some of the commonest mistakes about God. Clearing away the clutter of the bogus gods who lurk in some people's minds can help us if we find ourselves discussing the existence of the one true God, and can also ensure that there are no traces of those false gods in our own thinking. Here, then, are five gods who do not exist.

The god who is just plain boring

Some years ago I was invited to give a talk in a youth club on the subject of "The Seven Deadly Sins". There was a gratifyingly high attendance and before the talk started, I decided to do some audience research. "How many of you", I asked, "would have stayed away if my topic tonight had been 'The Seven Principal Virtues'?" Most of them admitted they would have stayed away. Sin, they thought, was a bit spicy, but virtue struck them as very dull, and when I pressed

them further, many of them said that they thought of God himself as dull.

However, just in terms of logic, this cannot be true. Think of the most interesting things in the world. If God exists, he must be at least as interesting as they are. A dull God could not create a fascinating world. The most fascinating music, the most fascinating art, the most fascinating people can be no more than a pale reflection of the God who created them. Theology, the search for God, has to be a fascinating quest. God forgive the Church if we have made it seem otherwise.

The god with a crab-apple face

Another false god is the god who is essentially negative, the "misery-gut god", the "god with a crab-apple face", the god whose main aim is to stop us having fun. Before I was ordained, one of the girls in my Sunday school class came to me and said: "Don't do it, Mr Lawrence. Just think, you won't ever be able to smoke, you won't ever be able to drink, you won't ever be able to have any fun any more". A rotten Sunday school teacher I had been! It seems I had given her a picture of a god who was thoroughly negative. Once again, in terms of simple logic, this cannot be. Creation is essentially a positive process; it cannot stem from a negative force.

The Bible is keen that we should know the real God as a God of joy. The Psalmist says to God: "In your presence is fullness of joy, at your right hand is pleasure for evermore".¹ Jesus takes up the same theme, as he promises his followers:

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"I am come that my joy should be in you".²

The god who is a million miles away

During one of my periods as a part-time hospital chaplain, I remember coming face to face with a trade union official who was a patient in one of my wards, and who was far from pleased to see me. When I stood at the end of his bed during the course of a ward round, he glared at me and said: "I don't need the likes of you. I can probably tell you far more about God than you can ever tell me".

Rather cheekily I replied: "All right then, I'll test you. I'll ask you one or two simple questions, and we'll see how much you know". The first question I asked him was: "Where is God?"

"That's easy", he replied. He pointed up with his finger. "God's up there in heaven", he said.

"Do you mean", I asked him, "that if we were to take a space ship and travel in the direction you were pointing, sooner or later we would arrive at a place called heaven and we could get out and have a look at God?"

"That sounds daft", he said.

"It is daft", I agreed.

He went onto the attack. "All right, if you're so clever, you tell me where God is."

"He's here", I told him.

"What, in this ward?", he asked.

"Yes", I said. "You may not see him, you may not hear him. But he's here." I can picture him now, as he looked up and down the ward and then said: "Strewth, it's as good as science fiction, isn't it!" We actually went on to become rather good friends.

Once we start to think about it, this god who is a million miles away, out of reach, out of touch, this "absentee landlord" god makes no sense at all.

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If God ceased to be involved in life as a whole, then life would cease to be. As scripture says: "In him we live and move and have our being".³ And this brings us to our next false god.

The 111 god

A lot of people seem to believe in a god who is for emergencies only, a sort of almighty aspirin, to whom we go only if we have a big headache. It is, of course, good to know that we can go to God in times of trouble, but it is a real waste to confine him to times of crisis. God not only wants to make the bad times bearable, but also to make the good times better—and better and better.

I often remember a visit I once paid to an elderly lady. We started to talk about prayer, and I asked her when she prayed and what sort of things she prayed about. I will never forget her answer. "Bless you", she said. "I never stop praying. I talk to him every day and all the day. I talk to him about everything." How right she was.

The casino god

This final false god is a theological version of Lady Luck. Many of the people who go to God as a 111 service also seem to think of him in this way. You may get lucky with him, or you may not. It depends on how he's feeling, which side of his heavenly bed he happened to get out of that morning. But this sort of

variable god has no place at all in the Christian faith. God is absolutely self-consistent. In the words of St James, in God there is "no variability, no shadow cast by turning".⁴ His will is constant and it is always for our good. In fact the proper purpose of prayer is not so much to persuade God to do what we want, but rather to find out what he wants and then to align our wills to his, because his will and purpose are always for the absolute best.

So what is the real God like?

If the boring god, the negative god, the distant god, the god for emergencies only, and the variable god are all bogus—if they are all gods who do not exist—is there any way in which we can discover God as he really is? Thankfully, the answer is a simple and positive "Yes!"

The way to sharpen up our picture of God is to look into his word, the Holy Bible. Why not take a look at what it says? If you need help, write to us at *Inside Life*.

Notes

- ¹ Psalms 16:11.
- ² John 15:11.
- ³ Acts 17:28.
- ⁴ James 1:17.

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Some people think that believing in God is like gambling: you may get lucky with him, or you may not.

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