Hasn't Science Disproved God?

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[0:00] at this issue tonight. I wonder if it's an issue for you, because I wasn't surprised that Mark thought like that. When you look at the way that the movement that's sometimes called New Atheism, led by the chief proponents, people like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and others, they suggest that there is a conflict between believing in the God of the Bible and science. So hasn't science disproved God? Well, I've got a few points I just wanted to cover with us tonight, and if you're interested, they're inside the notice sheet as well. So in the yellow sheet, just on the third side, in the bottom half there, you can see the three points that I'm going to raise underneath the Bible reading. And the first point there is that belief in God supports science. To show you that, the first thing we need to think to work out is, what is science? I've got a definition for us. I've got it out of the dictionary.

It's on the screen. Science is the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment. It sounds a bit complicated, doesn't it? But if we put things more simply and fairly reflect that, science is about observing how the natural and physical world works.

You observe it and you figure out how it seems to work. So you take observations. I might be sitting in my back garden underneath an apple tree, and an apple falls to the ground. That would be quite remarkable because we don't have an apple tree. But if you run with me in my kind of thought example, I'm sitting there and I think, that's interesting. An apple has fallen to the ground. I wonder if it's just that apple. And I wait a bit longer and another apple falls to the ground. Okay, this happens again and again. It looks as though when apples are free from their tree, they always go in one direction. They go to the ground. But is it just apples? So I get my step ladder out from the shed and I climb up and I drop some broccoli from the step ladder and see, well, it's not even just, it's not just apples.

It's vegetables as well as fruit that falls to the ground. This is my data. Then I might start dropping other things. I might drop a stone. I might drop some small animals. And this isn't real, you see. And this is my data. Now what I do then is I start to think there's a pattern emerging and I need to try and explain that pattern. And you come up with a theory, like the theory of gravity. So science is like a giant join the dots puzzle. You're trying to explain patterns that we see all around us in the observable world. You come up with a theory that seems to explain the data. And then what's key is that you keep testing and retesting to see how well that theory matches up with the facts, with the data.

And science is a really, really good thing. It helps us to know well. And it also helps us to live well. And the Scots are very good at it. It's great, isn't it, living in Scotland, the nation that gave the world penicillin, thanks to Alexander Fleming, through his science.

[3:19] Robert Watson Watt, who developed radar. James Watt, who invented steam engines. And because of John Logie Baird, another Scot, we can watch television. Because of Alexander Graham Bell, we can phone our friends to talk about what we've been watching. Science helps us to live well, as well as to know well. But when you think about what science is, like that, there's actually nothing in it that contradicts believing in a creator God. In fact, believing in a God like that, a God who made the universe, actually supports science. See, if there is a God of order, we would expect that there will be order in our universe. We'd expect to find laws of nature, consistent patterns that we can observe. Science assumes that those patterns are there.

But one of the remarkable things, actually, about science is that it can't explain why those patterns are there. It can't answer, science can't answer for itself the question, why is science possible?

Why is there underlying order in our universe? And why should my brain be able to detect and explain that order? But one very plausible explanation for that, perhaps the simplest explanation for my money, is that the God of the Bible exists and has created our world. In fact, in Europe, the whole foundation of the modern scientific endeavor was based on belief in God. There's numerous examples of that, but Johannes Kepler, who was a German astronomer, he was the man who first identified that the planets orbit in ellipses rather than circularly. It's a very important discovery. And he said this about his science, Oh God, I am thinking thy thoughts after thee. Over the main entrance of the Cavendish Laboratory, which is the home of the Department of Physics at the University of Cambridge, as you go through the Arch, there's an inscription, and it's from the Bible. It says, Great are the works of the Lord. They are pondered by all who delight in them. Very striking, the belief that as they went off on the scientific endeavor, they were pondering the great works of the God of the Bible in their belief.

So if belief in God supports science, why do they seem to conflict with each other today? Well, my second point is this, as we think about that issue, belief in God doesn't contradict science.

But really, for us to see that, we have to have good scientific thinking and good Christian thinking. I'm just going to think about those two in turn. One of the sources of the conflict that we see today, the apparent conflict between science and belief in God, is because sometimes scientists make too much of science.

[6:15] We've thought about what science is. It's vital. But it has its limits. And sometimes people don't see those limits. They go further with what's sometimes called scientism, which is where someone would say, science can explain everything.

So, in other words, you should only believe something is true if you can prove it by the scientific method, by empirical observation. But that is deeply problematic as a view of the world.

I'm just going to give a few reasons why. One is that it's self-defeating. You see, the statement, you should only believe something if you can prove it by science, science isn't actually a statement you can prove using science.

It's a philosophical assumption. And it's usually associated with what's called naturalism, the belief that this universe is all that there is. It's kind of a closed system of cause and effect.

We've already established that if you, well, I've already said, that if you deny that the God of the Bible exists, or that there is a God, you can't explain why it is that science even works.

[7:28] Why does the universe keep behaving today in the same way it did yesterday? How do I have confidence that tomorrow the universe will behave in the same way as it did today?

Now, that might sound very obvious to you. You might think, well, it's obvious that it will. But actually, without God, that is a problem that philosophers of science have been struggling with for centuries. And there are major problems with naturalism and scientism as a worldview.

For example, just to touch on a couple of them, it's extremely difficult to say that there are objective moral values if this universe is all that there is. Ideas like right and wrong, good and evil, they're just made up, meaningless categories.

If all that exists is what we can see. In my view, it is impossible to maintain that humans have rights, have innate rights, by being human if there's no God.

Or that life has any meaning. It's extremely difficult, you see, if there's no God, to establish why do human beings matter more than trees? Why do they even matter more than stones?

[8:38] It's very difficult. And very importantly, if you follow naturalism as a philosophy, as a worldview, then you deny God the possibility of making himself known to us.

See, the God of the Bible isn't a God that we could find within our universe. He's much bigger than that. He's beyond that. The kind of God we're talking about as Christians could never be found in a science experiment.

He is the reason, Christians believe, that science is even possible. So the only way we can find God is if he makes himself known to us, what you might call revelation. And we won't accept revelation if we've already committed ourselves that we'll only believe things that we can prove that by the scientific method.

So that's why we need good scientific thinking. Scientific thinking that realizes the limits of science, that uses science to ask the when questions and the how questions, but not the who questions or the why questions.

We need good scientific thinking. We also need good Christian thinking. One of the other reasons why there often seems to be a clash today between Christianity and science is that sometimes Christians go too far with what we say that we can work out from the Bible.

[10:00] So the Bible helps us with those questions like who and why about the universe, but often it doesn't give us the answers to the questions about when and how.

Perhaps the most obvious example is the field of evolutionary theory. Now, it's important to say when we talk about evolution that Christians disagree about evolution.

And so I was once asked a question in a question-and-answer session about evolution and I said it was almost like throwing a grenade into the room because Christians disagree about this issue.

It's important to say, I think, that there is a growing number of well-respected scientists who are skeptical about evolution as a grand theory to explain all of life today, to explain how it would work across species.

There are people who are skeptical about that. But I just want to say this evening that even if evolutionary theory is accurate to explain all of life once we have life, it should never bring us to deny the God of the Bible.

[11:04] The Bible does have a creation story in it and the Bible is made up of different kinds of literature. If we opened up the middle of the Bible, we'd be in a book of songs called Psalms and it's full of metaphors and imagery.

If we open up a gospel, an account of Jesus' life, it's written more like a news story to be an accurate account of what happened. We treat those different kinds of Bible literature differently.

And one of the ongoing questions for Christians is how should we read the opening chapter or few chapters of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, where we read an account of God creating the world.

Christians disagree. Some Christians think that that account is a more literal account of God's creation, creating in six actual days in the order that's described.

Other Christians think that that account of creation, the beginning of Genesis, looks much more like a poem or a song, celebrating key truths, but in a poetic fashion, teaching us about who created and why, but not about when and how.

[12:18] And that's why so many scientists, even working in fields like evolutionary biology or geology or astrophysics, are Christians who see no contradiction between their science and their Christian faith.

Stephen Jay Gould, who was himself an atheist, he's died now, he was a Harvard scientist and evolutionist, and he said this, either half my colleagues are enormously stupid or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs.

and equally compatible with atheism. Dr. Francis Collins, who headed up the Human Genome Project, is a Christian who accepts evolutionary science, and he said this, I'm a theistic evolutionist.

In other words, he believes that the creator God used evolution as part of his processes for creating. I take the view that God, in his wisdom, used evolution as his creative scheme.

I don't see why that's such a bad idea. That's pretty amazingly creative on his part. And what is wrong with that as a way of putting together in a synthetic way the view of God who is interested in creating a group of individuals that he can have fellowship with, us?

[13:36] Why is evolution not an appropriate way to get to that goal? I don't see a problem with that. So that's our second point. We've seen that belief in God supports science.

My second point was that belief in God doesn't contradict science. But to see that we need good scientific thinking and we need good Christian thinking. And my third point is this, studying science points to a creator God.

When we go about science and we look at the universe around us, it looks as though it's been designed. Now you might hear me say that and think, well you would think that, you're a Christian. Well fine.

But actually, the reason I said it like that is because actually, that's not a controversial thing to say. Even Richard Dawkins and other atheists would readily accept that the universe looks designed.

We, as human beings, look designed. The question is, is that real or is it just an illusion? Richard Dawkins would say that science can explain the appearance of design.

[14:41] But I want to argue that the more that we look at the universe scientifically, the more that we're pointed towards the existence of a creator. The first reason is that we still have to answer the question, why is there something rather than nothing?

Without God, what's the first cause for everything? I don't know if you watched Brian Cox's series, The Human Universe, last year on our televisions, but he implied that that question used to be a mystery but now there's a theory that might solve it.

And he went through this elaborate theory that is still just a theory and it was all about how if you have energy, you could possibly, he thinks, get to a point where the universe was formed, that matter came into existence through energy.

But he still needed to say there was energy and that just moves things back another stage. At one stage, presumably there was nothing and now there is something. Why is that?

What's the first cause? But the issue is not just that we've got something, how do we get the particular universe that we inhabit today? Even before we've thought about life getting here, we've got to be in a universe where stars and planets are possible.

[16:04] And there are 15 numbers, what scientists call constants, numbers like the size of the strong and weak nuclear forces, the speed at which the universe first expanded, the force of gravity, the extent of it, the size of the universe and so on.

These numbers, these 15 numbers, they each have to be exactly as they are to the tune of one part in a million or in some cases one part in a million million in order for the universe to exist and be able to have stars and planets.

If it was only down to chance, the universe is unthinkably unlikely to produce stars and planets. I just want to give you two examples of that. Here's one.

If the ratio between the strong nuclear constant and the electromagnetic constant was different by one part in 10 million billion, we couldn't have stars.

One part in 10 million billion. Another one. If the balance between the gravity constant and the electromagnetic constant was altered by one part in 10 to the power of 40, so 10 times 10, 40 times, stars couldn't produce planets capable of hosting life, planets that are just sustainable.

[17:22] That's the same probability as if you covered America and a billion other continents the same size with piles of coins stretching to the moon and you hid one red coin somewhere and you blindfolded your friend and asked them to pick out the red coin and they found it amidst the continents, amidst the piles of coins.

Those are just two examples. There was a writer, Andrew Wilson, who helped me to visualize this. He talked about intergalactic roulette. He said, imagine you've got this massive roulette wheel with a million numbers on it and you spin the roulette wheel to represent the first constant of the 15.

Imagine you've got 15 of these roulette wheels and you spin the first one and the ball bounces past thousands upon thousands of wrong numbers and it lands on exactly the right number. That's your gravitational constant.

And then you spin the second wheel for the strong nuclear constant and again the ball goes past hundreds of thousands of wrong numbers and it lands on just the right number. Imagine you do that 14 times and then you get to the 15th roulette wheel and you spin it and the ball skips along and something goes ever so slightly wrong and the ball lands just near but not on the right number.

The entire universe collapses. The Horsehead Nebula, the Andromeda Galaxy, the Alps, the Atlantic Ocean, they all disappear into a vortex of non-existence.

[18:56] All because one of the numbers was out by one part in a million. This is all, by the way, before you've got life from non-life, life from innate matter.

It's so unlikely that it's just completely implausible that this could have happened by chance. And so it seems that today we're just left with two possibilities. We can accept that there's a personal creator such as the God of the Bible or we can accept the theory that's perhaps most popular today with atheists that there is a multiverse.

That is, the reason the numbers work is that we happen to be in a universe where the constants matched up but there are millions upon millions and almost infinite number of other universes beyond ours where the numbers didn't work quite as they should.

Dawkins has said this about the multiverse theory. He says, in some of those universes I'm already dead. In a small minority of them you have a green mustache.

Now, I guess, I mean of course that's possible, isn't it? That is possible that there is this almost infinite number of universes out there beyond our universe and that in some of them you've got different colored hair as Dawkins says.

[20:12] But, who's the one who's got faith here? Isn't there a simpler explanation of why the universe seems to have been made for us, why the universe seems to know that we were coming, that there's a God behind it, a personal creator God.

So, where do we go from here? Well, I just want to finish by suggesting a way forward where there is an advantage to having a scientific mind and there's a limitation to having one.

First of all, the advantage, as we heard from Chris earlier this evening and the way his thinking got him to explore Jesus, if you're here this evening and you feel you are scientifically minded, I want to urge you to apply your mind to the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You see, Christianity stands or falls on that claim that Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross and rose again from the dead. And a lot of the Christians I know today who became Christians as adults, they've done so because they looked at that evidence and they are persuaded.

It's not scientific proof, you can't, of course, recreate it in a lab. Obviously, the whole point was that it was a unique event. And isn't that what we'd expect?

[21:27] If God really was demonstrating that he was stepping into our world, he would do things that only God can do. In fact, we would only recognize a miracle if we are scientific and we know how the world normally works.

You have to know that the sun rises in the east every day in order to notice one day if it suddenly rose in the west. But the question of whether Jesus really did rise from the dead is a historical question based on looking at evidence.

So it's not that science is about evidence and religion is about blind faith. No, Christianity invites us to consider the evidence. Did Jesus die on the cross?

Was the tomb really found empty? Was Jesus really seen alive again? And for my money, coming to that with a scientific mind is a big advantage. But I just wanted to add as I finish that there's a limitation to the scientific mind and the scientific approach.

Evidence-based thinking about God will only get us so far. Because the God of the Bible doesn't just want us to come to an intellectual conviction that he's there. He wants us to know him and to love him.

[22:41] And when we do come to know God we find true beauty and our appropriate response is wonder and awe at who he is. I wonder if I could explain it a bit like this.

When I was growing up I played the cello. But the only reason I played the cello was because we had a little music listening test at school and they said you did very well in your test why don't you play the cello?

I didn't know what a cello was. So I said yes and I played the cello and I played the cello a lot because I realised I was quite good at it and I studied GCSE music and then I carried on playing the cello realising that it looked very good on my record of achievement and people were interested in that.

and I could study Beethoven and I could study technical things about how Beethoven wrote his music because of my background in learning about it at school because I felt I had to do that and I could play various pieces of Beethoven I could play the cello parts of them and I'd done that because I felt I'm good at this and people want me to do it.

But it is really only in the last few years that I've listened to Beethoven and been profoundly moved as I listen to his music because it's suddenly stopped being an exercise for my head for my intellect it's become something that's captured my heart listening to Beethoven I think it's extraordinary it's beautiful I wonder as I listen to Beethoven Well the Christian faith is a bit like that we look at it with our minds we apply our minds we look at evidence but God wants us to try Christianity and it shows us if we try it we will find it to be true and we'll find that he is awesome and a God to wonder at C.S. Lewis put it like this in science we have the notes to a poem in Christianity we have the poem itself so I'd want to ask you you might have questions you might want to put them down questions about what I've said questions about the Christian faith generally I'd be happy to hear but have you heard enough this evening that would make you willing to investigate

[24:50] Jesus for yourself thanks for your time I'm going to hand back to Gordon so now our band are going to come up and they're going to play some music for us as we just meditate and listen or think about what Martin said and as we said at the start if you've got a question that you want Martin to answer I'm going to pass around this little plastic box and there's some little cards you might kind of write that question on and then we'll collect them and see where we are at the end pause the rest embed in the format and see how enforcementsided hydrat and whether which is that that said