

A GREATER PURPOSE

Finding Your Place in God's Great Big Space

Mark Hughes

A GREATER PURPOSE: Finding Your Place in God's Great Big Space
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Dedication

To my loving family, who provided me with a lifetime of sermon and book illustrations and never once complained that I was airing our dirty laundry—even though I clearly was.

And to Church of the Rock, my faith family, who gave me the opportunity to learn to share God's Word and then, most amazingly, responded by putting it into practice in their own lives in a way that I could only have dreamed.

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Introduction

To exist in this vast universe for a speck of time is the great gift of life. Our tiny sliver of time is our gift of life. It is our only life. The universe will go on, indifferent to our brief existence, but while we are here we touch not just part of that vastness, but also the lives around us.

— Terry Goodkind¹

IN THE 1970s, the trend among young people was to spend at least a few months travelling through Europe before resuming “normal” life in North America. There was a slew of books written on how to do Europe “on the cheap,” like *Europe on \$5 a Day*. The quirkiest of all these how-to books was *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Europe*. For example, it emphatically stated that there was really only one essential must-have item, and that was a towel. If you had your own towel, you had it made.

My older brother Brad was one of those young people who headed off to Europe to discover the world and grow his hair long. When he left, he was wearing his hair like Paul McCartney did in his early days, but when he returned, he looked more like Ozzy Osbourne. He was also sporting the requisite pierced ear that he had inflicted upon himself with a sewing needle. Apparently it hurt a lot more than he had expected. The older generation was not yet comfortable with the long hair thing, so my father tried to shame him into a haircut by calling him “Brenda.” It didn’t work. Brad followed *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Europe* religiously and survived six months with only a few hundred dollars and one towel. When he returned home to Canada, my mother didn’t wash the towel—she had to burn it. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Europe* was, and still is, the number one book stolen from libraries.

During this same period, Douglas Adams from England was trekking through Europe following the not so timeless principles of the “Guide,” and wondered why no one had written a guide for “hitch-hiking around the galaxy.”² That inspiration led to him write the bizarre story, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. It became a hit radio show on the BBC, and eventually Adams wrote five books based on the radio series. He has a huge cult following even today and the five books have sold over 15 million copies. In 2005, it was made into a big screen movie. If you are under thirty-five, you have probably seen it. If you are over thirty-five, you probably don’t want to. It is an utterly inane, bizarre, yet entirely entertaining story. Adam’s journey across the cosmos was all in jest, but his motivation was not. Who doesn’t need a hitchhikers guide to the galaxy? We all feel insignificant in the great expanse of the universe.

When you begin to consider that you came into this world as only a single sperm, competing against 250 million others for the right to fertilize your mother’s egg, only to discover that you were only one of 7 billion other people trying to find our place on planet Earth, which turned out to be only one of nine other planets (if you count Pluto—it will always be a planet in my books) in a solar system that is only one of 200 million others in a galaxy (the Milky Way), which is only one of 200 million other galaxies in a universe that is 13.67 billion light years across . . . it is perhaps only human to feel a little lost in space. Our universe is so far beyond our comprehension that we cannot even begin to understand it. The only reasonable conclusion is that we are nothing more than a speck in time. Yet God, the Creator of all of this, says,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world . . .”

EPHESIANS 1:3–4

God chose each and every one of us before He created any of this. Not one single person is an accident or a freak of nature. We all emerged, not

from the primordial ooze but from the heart of God, with a divine purpose for being here. Therefore, no one is insignificant. No one's life is without meaning and destiny. We may be a mere speck in a vast universe, but because of Him who created each of us, we can all find our place in God's great big space.

If you have never read *A Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*,³ I'll save you the trouble of buying the book and get right to the point. The story revolves around building a supercomputer called Deep Thought, and after it runs a program for 7½ million years it spits out the answer to life, the universe, and everything.

The answer is 42.

If you have seen the movie, you will think that's funny. Again, if you haven't seen it, it will just sound plain stupid. Both conclusions are correct. The computer goes on to suggest that what we really need to know is The Ultimate Question! The computer says, "So once you do know what the question actually is, you'll know what the answer means."⁴

As convoluted as that sounds, there is an important premise here. The first step in answering any question is to know the right question. The answer 42 makes perfect sense if the question is 6×7 but not much sense if the question at hand is the meaning of life, the universe and everything. THAT is the correct question. Everyone wants answers to life, the universe and everything. Everyone!

Author Stephen Hawking wrote books about space, time, astrophysics and black holes, but they were really scientific attempts to answer the question of the meaning of life. I would go as far as to say that Hawking was desperate to know that answer. He even called one of his theories the theory of everything. At the end of *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking drew this conclusion:

However, if we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find

the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God.⁵

Hawking seemed to be suggesting that the existence of God was necessary to explain the origin of the universe. The book went on to be a bestseller with over 9 million copies sold, making the Oxford cosmologist a household name in many circles. Hawking later admitted that he almost omitted this concluding line from his book and believed that had he done so sales would have been less than half. Why? Because the world is anxious to know the meaning of life, the universe and everything. Once you take God out of the equation, you are not even close to an answer. Which, sadly, is exactly what Hawking did in later musings.

We are each free to believe what we want and it is my view that the simplest explanation is there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization. There is probably no heaven, and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe, and for that, I am extremely grateful.⁶

IF JESUS IS THE ANSWER, THEN WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

No answer makes sense if we don't know the question. This whole concept of understanding the big question first dawned on me one day as I was driving my mini-van behind a modern day Wiccan. Her assortment of bumper stickers gave her away: "My other car is a broom," "Tastes like Wiccan" (whatever that means—tastes like chicken?) and, "If Jesus is the answer, then what is the question?" That was the one that got me thinking. Jesus makes no sense if people don't know what the question is.

If people do not know that they are fallen sinners in need of salvation, then Jesus has little significance to them. That is a crucial question indeed, and it's the subject of countless books. But is it the big question? Perhaps, but I think there is an even bigger question.

If Stephen Hawking has overcomplicated the question, we preachers have oversimplified it: "You are a sinner going to hell. You need Jesus. The

end.” We need to at least try to back up the train a bit and look at the big picture. There has to be a reason for us to be here in the first place. It all makes no sense unless every single one of us has a God-given destiny and purpose. I can’t believe for a minute that the whole thing was a biological accident and that we just crawled out of the primordial ooze to live for a season and return to the ground as worm food. If that is all there is to it, then Paul the apostle was correct when he said, “*If the dead do not rise, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’*” (1 Corinthians 15:32). Existence itself becomes meaningless. Morality is really not that important if human life has no intrinsic value. Which, incidentally, is exactly why societies fall into abject moral decay when they abandon their belief in a Creator.

The bigger question has to be Why do we exist in the first place? Why did He create the earth? The heavens? The universe? This question is so big that all others hang upon it. Why did He stick each of us in the midst of it? Why did God create us? For what *greater purpose* does each of us exist? It is a question that we all ask, in one form or another, sinner and saint alike. If we can answer that question, we can better understand our own destiny. If we can’t, we will never understand life.

The greatest thinkers of all time have wrestled with the big question of existence. The seventeenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes gave the simplest answer: « *Je pense, donc je suis,* » which translates to, “I think, therefore I am.” Hmm . . . excuse me while I think about that. The joke goes like this: Descartes goes into a bar. The bartender asks, “Rene would you like one for the road?” Descartes says, “I think not—” and POOF he disappears!

This book is about answering the big question. It is not another book about self-actualization and maximizing your human potential. There have been enough books written about “becoming all you can be” and setting new sales records or being employee of the month for the twelfth time this year. It is about discovering your *greater purpose* in life. It is about finding meaning in a world that is often confusing and misleading. It is about *finding your place in God’s great big space*. As Terry Goodkind quipped, it is about “not only touching the vastness of the universe but the lives of those

around us.”⁷ Ah, there’s the rub. Our destiny is ultimately wrapped up in the lives of those around us.

As a pastor, I do a lot of funerals. I see people at the very end of their journey, and I can say with extreme certainty that the only real difference we make in this life is how we impact the lives of those around us while we are here.

There is one biblical text that I will refer to again and again throughout the pages of this book, and that is Philippians 3:13–14.

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul says here that, for all his pursuits in life, his greatest is to “lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). In other words, he continually strives to lay hold of God’s purpose for his life. There is no higher aspiration than this. Even the great apostle Paul, who wrote two-thirds of the New Testament and “turned his world upside down” (Acts 17:6), still wrestled to try and find his destiny in God. If he, of all people, felt as if he had not yet arrived, is it not any wonder the rest of us do as well?

WHAT REALLY MATTERS IS NOT WHAT WE ACTUALLY ACCOMPLISH BUT THAT WE COMMIT OUR LIVES TO PURSUING GOD’S PURPOSES.

Perhaps the most important thing I will say in this entire book is this: what really matters is not what we actually accomplish but that we commit our lives to pursuing God’s purposes. Whether we feel like we changed our world, or not, is not nearly as important as the sense of fulfillment that we at least attempted to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus laid hold of us. I am thoroughly convinced that it will be these people who will hear on that

fateful day, “*Well done, good and faithful servant . . . Enter into the joy of your lord*” (Matthew 25:21).

You didn’t choose to be born. You didn’t choose to live on this planet. We all came into this world kicking and screaming—literally. You were wet, cold and bloody, and to add insult to injury, the doctor slapped you on the butt to get your attention and then, in a Darth Vader-like voice said, “Welcome to planet Earth. Enjoy your stay.” There was nothing you could do about it except cry unless, of course you were born Chuck Norris. When he was born, the doctor slapped him on the backside. Fortunately for the doctor, he was already in a hospital.

The Bible refers to us as sojourners or “strangers in the land” (Hebrews 11:13, 1 Peter 2:11). We are all going along for the ride, and none of us are in the driver’s seat, so we had better figure out why we are here.

Years ago, famous cosmologist Carl Sagan insisted that the universe has other life forms on other planets, perhaps even entire alien civilizations. Movies like *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and *Avatar* have only served to reinforce the belief that we are not alone in the universe. The idea appeals to our human nature because there is something eerie about the thought that we might be on the only inhabited planet, floating aimlessly like a speck in a universe that is some 13 billion light years across. It really doesn’t matter what worldview one comes from, we all long to see the bigger picture.

Today, science is clearly beginning to challenge Sagan’s speculations. Modern astronomers have noted that there are certain characteristics about our universe—and planet Earth in particular (like the ratio of the gravitational force constant to the electromagnetic force constant)—that are so specific that if they were altered, even slightly, our planet could not contain human life. Today, 153 finely tuned characteristics have been identified.⁸ If there was any slight change in the way the universe exists, it could not sustain human life.

The chance of there being life in the universe at all is one trillionth of one trillionth percent.⁹ That means the odds that any given planet in the universe would possess the necessary conditions to support intelligent physical life is a number so large it might as well be infinity. We are breaking all the odds. There are some 100 billion solar systems like ours in our galaxy,

the Milky Way, and there are 100 billion galaxies in the universe—are we so certain our planet is the only one that can sustain life?

Science is now strongly suggesting that we are not a fluke of nature and that the entire universe was designed so mankind could have a place to live. This has become known as the Anthropic Principle, which upholds that the universe appears to be “designed” for the sake of human life.

This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, before any plant of the field was in the earth and before any herb of the field had grown. For the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.

GENESIS 2:4–8

The bottom line is this: the universe exists for the purpose of sustaining human life. God created the heavens and earth and stars. He made the universe stretch out, all 13.67 billion light years of it, and put us right in the midst of it. It is mind boggling beyond comprehension. None of our finite, peanut-sized brains are capable of understanding a universe of these dimensions. No one is able to comprehend a Creator who could have framed it all together as marvellously as He did with such excruciating attention to the minutest detail. And the more we learn about God’s creation, the more in awe we should become.

During the time of Alexander the Great, the conqueror of the mighty Grecian empire, an indigent philosopher of Alexander’s court sought relief at his hand. The philosopher was given the authority to receive from Alexander’s treasurer any sum he should ask. He immediately demanded ten thousand pounds. The treasurer balked at the extravagant amount, but

Alexander replied, “Let the money be instantly paid. I am delighted with this philosopher’s way of thinking. He has done me a singular honour. By the largeness of his request, he shows the high idea he has conceived of my wealth and munificence.”¹⁰

The extravagance of the universe is, of course, a reflection of God, not of us. The Scripture says that when we look upon it, creation itself declares the Creator. It is the height of human arrogance to think that any of it could exist without Him.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

ROMANS 1:20–23

In 2003, after thirteen years of mapping the entire human DNA, the Human Genome Project was completed. They identified 20,500 human genes consisting of 3.3 million chemical base pairs in every human cell. Other than identical twins, all 7 billion people on the planet have a combination unique to them. After the project was completed, the lead scientist, Dr. Francis Collins, sat down and wrote a book called *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*.¹¹ He was overwhelmed by God’s creation and needed to express it in an unashamed way to the world. Imagine the stir he caused among his colleagues. The scientific community has not always been comfortable with such open declarations of faith.

Collins’ story is an interesting one. In the 1970s, as a medical student, he was an avowed atheist. He saw no reason or need for the existence of God. After he graduated and started practicing medicine, however, his life

was not so academic. He began to encounter the life and death issues of his patients. In the face of terminal diagnoses they asked, “What do you believe, doctor?” The science he loved so much was powerless to answer the really important questions.

If the universe had a beginning, then who created it?
Why are the physical constants in the universe so finely tuned
to allow the possibility of complex life forms?
Why do humans have a moral sense?
What happens after we die?
What is the meaning of life?
Why are we here?
Why does mathematics work, anyway?

Slowly but surely, as Collins turned to the Scriptures and the Christian faith, the answers to life’s most challenging questions began to emerge (although the math one is not as clearly addressed). The Human Genome Project only served to cement his sentiment that creation was not—and could not be—a fluke of nature but rather a divine act of a sovereign God. Collins puts it this way.

Will we turn our backs on science because it is perceived as a threat to God, abandoning all the promise of advancing our understanding of nature and applying that to the alleviation of suffering and the betterment of humankind? Alternatively, will we turn our backs on faith, concluding that science has rendered the spiritual life no longer necessary, and that traditional religious symbols can now be replaced by engravings of the double helix on our alters? Both of these choices are profoundly dangerous. Both deny truth. Both will diminish the nobility of humankind. Both will be devastating to our future. And both are unnecessary. The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral or in the laboratory. His creation is majestic, awesome, intricate and beautiful—and it cannot be at war with itself. Only we imperfect humans can start such battles. And only we can end them.

A GREATER PURPOSE - SAMPLE

. . . If humans evolved strictly by mutation and natural selection, who needs God to explain us? To this, I reply: I do. The comparison of chimp and human sequences, interesting as it is, does not tell us what it means to be human. In my views, DNA sequence alone, even if accompanied by a vast trove of data on biological function, will never explain certain special human attributes, such as the knowledge of the Moral Law and the universal search for God. Freeing God from the burden of special acts of creation does not remove Him as the source of the things that make humanity special, and of the universe itself. It merely shows us something of how He operates.¹²

In a way, this is the same place that a much humbler King David arrived while he was still a shepherd boy lying out in the fields at night.

*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?*

PSALM 8:3–4

He, too, was asking the big questions, and he, too, was just trying to find his place in God's great big space.

Notes

CHAPTER ONE

- ¹ Terry Goodkind, *Confessor* (New York: Tor Books, 2007), 756.
- ² M. J. Simpson, *Hitchhiker: A Biography of Douglas Adams*, first US ed. (Boston: Justin Charles & Co., 2003), 340.
- ³ Douglas Adams and Eoin Colfer, *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan Am Books, 1979).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ⁵ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 174–175.
- ⁶ *Curiosity: Did God Create the Universe?* Season 1, Episode 1, first broadcast Aug. 7, 2011, by Discovery Channel. Series created by Tom Leach. Produced by Darlow Smithson Productions (as Darlow Smithson Productions Ltd.) for Discovery Channel. Accessed online as “There is no God. There is no Fate.” YouTube video, 1:33. Posted by “stepore,” August 15, 2011, <https://youtu.be/7L7VTdzuY7Y>.
- ⁷ Goodkind, *Confessor*, 756.
- ⁸ Hugh Ross, Kenneth Samples and Mark Clark, “Appendix B: Probabilities for Life on Earth,” in *Lights in the Sky and Little Green Men: A Rational Christian Look at UFOs and Extraterrestrials* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).
- ⁹ Hugh Ross, “Astronomical Evidences for a Personal, Transcendent God,” in J. P. Moreland (ed.), *The Creation Hypothesis* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 170.
- ¹⁰ Joseph S. Exell, ed., *The Biblical Illustrator* (Electronic Database Copyright © 2002, 2003, 2006, 2011 by Biblesoft, Inc.) accessed June 13, 2015, http://biblehub.com/sermons/pub/faith_in_prayer.htm, s.v. “Matthew 21:22.”
- ¹¹ Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press/Simon & Shuster, 2006).
- ¹² Collins, *Language of God*, 140.