



Title	→ Series: Talking About What We Don't Talk About Part 4 (Science and Faith): Friends or Foes?
Scripture	Genesis 1: 1-5; Psalm 111; Hebrews 11: 1-3
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
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Note	This text is an approximate rendering

Minister: Peace be with you.
God's people: And also with you.



In the movie *Inherit the Wind* we are told about a true story from 1925. Lawmen walked into the classroom of high school biology teacher John Scopes.¹ A young teacher, keen on fresh ideas, Scopes was in deep trouble. He was apparently teaching his biology students something called Darwin's theory of evolution. And in the Tennessee of 1925 a law had been passed that made it illegal to teach anything that suggested that "man has descended from a lower order of animals." But Scopes decided to teach it anyway to his interested pupils, looking on in amazement as Scopes began his lesson with lawmen waiting in the wings to see what he would say. He began his lesson. And he was taken away in handcuffs.

The well-documented trial showcases the crusade led against the young Scopes. One side calling the other "scientific atheists" and the other "backwards backwaters." One side representing more literal readings of Scripture and the other arguing that you can still believe in God and even in the Bible while being open to scientific advancements.



This morning we continue our series "Talking About What We Don't Talk About." When I announced this series the first idea I received from one of you was the one we grapple with today—a topic many of us think about and struggle to come to terms with: Science and Faith: Are they enemies?

This morning I'm asking you to put on your thinking caps. Why? Because you have a thinking mind that our Lord gave you, and so you need to use it if your faith is to have intellectual integrity. I also need to use mine. There are too many churches out there where you are only welcome if, along with hanging up your coat, you check your mind at the door. But for a robust, modern faith that simply

won't do. Someone said that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, *mind* and strength.² I think you know who.

As I outlined a few weeks ago, our approach is to ask 3 questions. First: *What* are we talking about? Second: Why *don't* we talk about it? And third: Why *should* we talk about it? Here we go.



First: What are we talking about? We are talking about faith and science.

In the movie *Nacho Libre*, Nacho (played by funny man Jack Black) is a monastery cook who, for a variety of reasons ends up doubling as a tag-team wrestler in the dodgy night life of Mexico. He finds a partner, Esqueleto, a skinny rodent-of-a-man who has no apparent morals or integrity—but who can fight like blazes. One night Nacho says to his new friend: “I’m a little concerned right now... about your salvation and stuff. How come you have not been baptized?” Esqueleto replies, “Because I never got around to it okay? I dunno why you always have to be judging me because I only believe in science.”

It’s a hilarious movie. But that little conversation between Nacho and Esqueleto reveals one of the biggest challenges to a modern, robust Christian faith. And it is this: The notion that faith is somehow the opposite of science. Esqueleto says, “I believe in science” as if science was something to be believed in, as if it was an issue of faith, as if it was a religion unto itself. Is it?

Tim Keller, best-selling author and the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, expresses the problem well. Here is what he writes, “It is common to believe today that there is a war going on between science and religion. One of the reasons for this perception is that the media needs to report news events as stories with protagonists and antagonists. It gives wide publicity to battles between secular and religious people over the teaching of evolution in schools, stem-cell research, in vitro fertilization, and many other areas of medicine and science.”³

But is there any merit in thinking this? Are faith and science opposites?

First, we need to know what science is. Science is a method of inquiry. It inquires about the physical world around us. Michael Ruse, who is a philosopher of biology, says that science “by definition deals only with the natural, the repeatable, that which is governed by law.”⁴ In other words, science uses things like experimentation and measurement of observable data to better understand the physical world around us. And we all benefit in some way by this process: medical advances, weather tracking systems, many of our common technologies, electricity.

So to say that you “believe in science,” and therefore not in God, is simply to be confused about what science is. Science does not primarily address God because you can’t measure and quantify and physically test God’s qualities. It’s like saying that because you think mathematics is helpful, well then you don’t believe in grace or forgiveness. It simply doesn’t make sense.

Peter Medawar, an Oxford University immunologist who won the Nobel Prize for medicine, wrote a book called *The Limits of Science*. In it, he says there are questions “science cannot answer, and that no conceivable advance in science would empower us to answer... I have in mind such questions as: How did everything begin? What are we all here for? What is the point of living?”⁵ Science simply cannot answer things that are outside the scope of observable, measurable, physical reality.

Say my Aunt Matilda has baked an incredible cake and submitted it to the world’s leading scientists to examine it. The nutrition scientists will calculate the calories and tell us the effect on the body; the biochemists will tell us about the proteins and fats; the physicists will tell us about fundamental particles. But what they *can’t* do is tell us if it tastes good. They can’t tell us if it is beautiful. And they can’t tell us why Aunt Matilda made it in the first place. These questions are simply outside of their capacity to answer.⁶

But, Matthew, okay, we get all that. It has helped us accomplish some great things even for my own family like chemotherapy. But what about when what scientists say about the world seems to contradict what the Bible says? What about that? That’s the conflict *I* want to know about.

It brings us to our second question: Why *don’t* we talk about it?



I think there are three main things. First, *we have been tricked into thinking they are opposites*. I’ve already shown you my hand on this one by saying that they’re not. In fact, science simply helps us better understand the visible, physical world that an invisible God created. Johannes Kepler, the German astronomer and mathematician who played a key role in the scientific revolution in the 17th century, put it like this: “The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order which has been imposed on it by God, and which he revealed to us in the language of mathematics.”⁷ He’s reminding us about what it says in our passage from Hebrews 11 that Kim read a few minutes ago: “that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”

It all points to God.

Think about creation for a moment. Think of how amazing it is. There are in the neighbourhood of 70 trillion cells in the human body. Think of the Milky Way galaxy and its 2 billion stars. Think of the miracle of childbirth. Think of, think of, think of. When you marvel at the wonder of this universe it is perhaps a *greater* leap of faith to say that it’s all chance. A *greater* leap of faith.

The second reason why I think we don’t talk about this is because *we’ve been sent a subliminal message in our culture that you can’t be an inquisitive, questioning, scientifically minded person and still have faith*. So let’s explode this lie that inquisitive, scientifically minded people can’t also be faithful people.

There were two studies done, one in 1916 and the other in 1997. The first one was done on scientists asking them if they believed in a God who actively communicates with humanity, at least through prayer. In 1916, 40% said they did. 40% said they didn't, and 20% said they weren't sure. In 1997 the same study was repeated. 80 years later it was reported in the scientific journal *Nature* that they found the numbers had not changed significantly.⁸ And as theologian and sociologist Rodney Stark has argued based on his own research, the number of scientists who consider themselves moderately or deeply religious has actually *increased* in recent decades.⁹

So yes, hopefully it's painfully clear that inquisitive, scientifically-minded people can in fact be faithful people. And I know you know this, quite simply because so many of *you* are those thoughtful people. That is one of the wonderful things I have learned about you over the past 3 and a half years. Francis Collins, a distinguished research scientist and head of the Human Genome Project, believes that the fine-tuning, splendour, and order of nature point us to a divine Creator. And in his book he describes his conversion from atheism to Christianity.¹⁰

Funny how you don't hear those stories in the news.

The third reason why we don't talk about the apparent tension between faith and science very much is that *we are afraid it might erode the authority of the Bible or God*. As you know, Scripture says great and very confident things about Lord Almighty acting in miraculous ways. The Lord parts waters, walks on waters and turns water into wine—all kinds of things that we're simply not able to test and measure by scientific inquiry. Incredible one-time events. It can make us uncomfortable sometimes when we try to reconcile the two. And when we talk about a miraculous God we worry people will think we're loony. Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd President of the United States, solved his own discomfort with all this simply by physically cutting out the miracles in the pages of his Bible, leaving himself with a kind of re-constructed morality Bible mostly of the teachings of Jesus. Well that might work for him, but what about the rest of us? That ain't gonna fly in this church.

So to show us how science does not threaten the authority of Scripture or God I want to use the example of perhaps the most hotly contested passage of the Bible, the story of creation in Genesis: The story of the world being created not because of a Big Bang Theory of an explosive event that happened over 10 billion years ago, but over a period of 6 days.

And as we explore it, we move into the third question: Why *should* we talk about the dialogue between science and faith?



As far as I'm concerned we *should* talk about it because of two main reasons. The first has to do with some common ground between science and faith: they are both interested in truth. We Christians have a conviction that "the" capital-T Truth is not just a thing or idea but a person, Jesus Christ. He's Truth personified. And so, we are given confidence in our pursuit because we can look for truth knowing that if we find some, it is surely somehow a part of Christ.

But maybe we are still intimidated. Yes, Matthew, but what about those six days of creation?!

Here's the next reason why we *should* talk about science and faith: Scientific discoveries make us return to Scripture and take it more seriously. Many of the most modern discoveries even about the origin of the world and humanity make us go back and re-examine the assumptions we always held to be true, and encourage us to mine for something more profound and perhaps even more meaningful for our lives today. After all, Scripture is power for life. I have said that before and I will say it again and again and again: *Scripture is power for life*. But not if we just skim the words every once in a while; we need to study it and take it seriously. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk whose meditations I deeply respect, says it best: "The Bible may be difficult and confusing, but it is meant to *challenge* our intelligence, not insult it. It becomes insulting when it is distorted by fanaticism and foolish religiosity; but we must not blame the Bible for the distortions imposed on it by others."¹¹

What distortions?

Let me show you what I mean. I invite you to open your black pew Bibles to page 1. Let's re-read the opening words of Scripture:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

As soon as we open the Bible, we come upon a problem for our scientific minds: All this in 24 hours? It's equally incredible on the other 5 days.

Now many theories have been suggested to make this passage a little better on the digestion, a little more tolerable for our modern, scientific minds. Some have argued, quoting 2nd Peter in the New Testament, that "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." This theory suggests that we are talking about a larger amount of time than just one, technical day. Another theory is that maybe the book of Genesis isn't talking about consecutive days. Maybe the days are spread out. Or, another theory goes, maybe the earth rotated much more slowly than it does now. I'm not so sure about that one. Or, maybe the Lord inspired the writers of Genesis to say 'day' instead of 'aeon' because the original audience wouldn't have known what an aeon was, so God wanted them to at least get what he was talking about so he said 'day.' And the list goes on and on.

I also have a theory I'm curious about: Is it possible that the reference to "the first day" is the amount of time it took God not to create light and darkness or whatever, but was the amount of time it took God to reveal it to whoever wrote it down. God knows! But I *still* think we're getting distracted.

So as we try out the idea that scientific inquiry actually forces us back to Scripture to see it with greater clarity, I invite you to look down a bit in your Bibles, still one page 1, to Day 4, and you'll find that in verse 14:

And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.

Did you catch it? Now if we're paying really close attention we see something. On Day 1, God created light and darkness, and yet God didn't create what until Day 4? The sun. But what is light but that which the sun creates? What's happening is that Scripture itself is giving us a clue. It is telling us that we are not supposed to be reading a history book or science text on how it all physically happened. Did the writer of Genesis actually think that there could be light before the sun? Of course not! These people weren't stupid: they knew that the light in the sky was from the sun. They knew it was needed to help crops grow. They knew these things. But Scripture itself is telling us that what it's really about is something else.

Part of what it's telling us is that God is the Master of the Universe. Master. That nature jumps to his tune, not the other way around. Light without the sun, *that's* a Big Bang Theory!

Something else that helps us out when dealing with a difficult passage is how Scripture interprets itself. What we do is look at other places in Scripture that talk about the same (or a similar) topic to help us better understand the parts that confuse us. So let's turn in our Bibles to 2nd Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 6. It's on page 939, the top right of the page.

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

It's just enough of a reminder that the light from Day 1 of creation isn't just about physical light. It's about the light that comes from Christ. And so it is not only about physical light, but it is more fully about the light of Christ coming out of darkness; it is about bringing order out of chaos. It is about bringing love out of nothing. Those are three of the huge themes in the creation story.

On Day 1 of creation, no matter how long it took (because I don't even really think the original author was thinking about the days it took; and to focus on it too much is to let someone else set our agenda), on Day 1 of creation that's what Scripture is telling us God was really up to: about bringing the light of Christ out of darkness; about bringing order out of chaos; about bringing love out of nothing. *That's* a Big Bang Theory.

It's a case where scientific discovery has pushed our faith to help us see a bigger, more faithful picture.

So why should we talk about the dialogue between faith and science? Because both are concerned with truth; and since we love Christ who is the capital-T Truth personified, we know that any real truth we discover has some kind of grounding in him. And not only that, but we should also talk about the dialogue between science and faith because it will give us a *greater* understanding of Scripture and of God, not a lesser understanding. The people of Christ are never intimidated. There is nothing under sun or moon, in storm or other risk of peril that will shake us from the rock of our faith who is our Lord Jesus Christ. And because of that, everything can somehow be used by Lord Almighty to make us stronger.



Tony Campolo tells of once being a counsellor at a boy's summer camp. In his group of young boys, there was Billy, physically challenged and with a severe speech impediment. The other boys made fun of him and laughed at him the way that Grade 6 boys sometimes do. On the day on which it was the turn of Campolo's group to lead the camp worship service, he asked for volunteers to speak. None of the boys volunteered... except Billy.

When the time came, in front of the whole camp, the Grade 6 boys anticipated having great fun at Billy's expense. When Billy got up to speak, the other boys were sniggering and snorting. It took Billy almost ten minutes to deliver his three word sermon: "Jesus... loves... me." When he'd finished, Campolo reports, every boy in that camp was in tears.¹²

That's a creation story. Remember how it was in the camp before the service? And then Billy spoke. And what happened? The light of Christ coming out of darkness; order out of chaos; bringing love out of nothing. Friends, you cannot physically see or measure God, but he is there. Creating. You cannot physically see or measure faith, but it is there. Creating. You cannot physically see or measure love, but it is there. Creating.



So what ever happened to our friend John Scopes, arrested for teaching evolution in a Tennessee school in 1925? It essentially came down to the fact that he broke the law, pure and simple. He was found guilty and fined \$100. In Hollywood's version of the story, the prosecuting attorney was played by Spencer Tracy, one of my all-time favourite actors. And as he leaves the courtroom after a long battle he slowly puts on his hat and picks up not only his briefcase, but his Bible. It's a big surprise to the viewer. It turns out that the great advocate for using your mind in all matters of life is also a man of God. A man of prayer.

Let's continue to build a modern, robust faith.

Next week: Spiritual warfare and Satan. What do they have to do with you and me?

Let's continue to talk about what we don't talk about.



¹ For your interest, the “Scopes Monkey Trial” is remembered by Hollywood in the classic Spencer Tracy film titled *Inherit the Wind*.

² From Jesus’ own lips in the Gospel of Mark 12: 30 (and elsewhere).

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 90.

⁴ Michael Ruse, *Darwinism Defended* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1982), 322.

⁵ Peter B. Medawar, *The Limits of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 66.

⁶ This illustration is inspired by John Lennox in his article “Challenges from Science” in *Beyond Opinion: Living the Faith We Defend*, ed. Ravi Zacharias (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 113.

⁷ This is a famous quote found in: *Astronomia Nova De Motibus*.

⁸ Edward Larson and Larry Witham, “Leading Scientists Still Reject God,” *Nature* 394, no. 6691 (1998): 313.

⁹ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 192-97.

¹⁰ Francis Collins’ books is called *The Language of God*.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 14-15. Italics added.

¹² This story was re-told by the Rev. Clyde Ervine at a ‘Stewards by Design’ Presbyterian Church in Canada conference held in October, 2011.