

## **“Why Church? The Truth About Reality”**

*Reading: Philippians 2:1-11; Hebrews 9:24-28*

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There's a famous equation known as the Drake Equation that is an attempt to estimate how many intelligent extraterrestrial civilizations sending out radio signals there might be in our galaxy. It relies on estimated guesses for things like the rate of star creation in our galaxy, how many habitable planets each star is likely to have, how many of those planets develop intelligent life, and so on. There's a lot of estimation involved, and the Drake Equation is really only meant to provide the starting point for discussion, not to be a guarantee. But the interesting thing is that you can be fairly conservative with your estimates of, say, how many habitable planets develop intelligent life, and because of the incredible vastness of space, you can still come up with hundreds or thousands, or even millions, of intelligent alien species in our galaxy who should be capable of sending out radio waves that we could detect. And that then leads us to the really interesting question: why haven't we found any of them? It's a serious question. This is not some fringe discussion among a bunch of crackpot conspiracy theorists on an obscure internet forum; it's something you hear NASA scientists and eminent physicists like Stephen Hawking discussing.

There's a somewhat similar discussion you hear from time to time about the concept of the multiverse, which is the suggestion that there could be an infinite number of alternate universes that are only slightly different than one another. Some of them may have totally different physical laws than ours, while some of them may be almost the same except that their version of you has slightly different facial hair. And once again, this is not just an idea for a good comic book or sci-fi movie; there are real discussions being held about this, and serious physicists are studying it.

The point is that reality is far stranger than we often give it credit for being. There's so much we don't know about the very nature of our world, and in fact there things that we're not even sure how to go about studying them if do exist. The universe is vast and strange and unexplored and incredibly exciting. And what always amazes me is how some people can look at all the strangeness and the vastness and the mystery and be absolutely convinced that there can be no God. I'm not saying God is a space alien or an alien from another dimension, and I actually don't have a problem with people who don't believe in God because of philosophical reasons or theological reasons, or people who are agnostic. What surprises me is people who claim to be so scientific in their worldview and will accept all kinds of strange things like alternate dimensions, but they absolutely will not leave any room for God in their strange, vast universe.

Reality is much bigger and stranger than we give it credit for being. Of course in the church we claim that there is a God in all this vastness, and in fact we claim that He is greater and more magnificent even than our cosmos, but even so, God's creation is still bigger and stranger than we usually give it credit for being. And in fact this is yet another answer to our ongoing question, “Why Church?” Why take the time and the effort to be a part of this strange gathering of people doing the strange things we do? One reason is that the church tells us the truth about our reality. It tells us important things about how the universe works, how it came to be, how it's intended to operate, and where it's going. These are not necessarily scientific truths, but they are true nonetheless. There is more to our reality than we can see or measure.

As we've been doing for several weeks now, we're using the book of Hebrews as our guide for answering this question of why church. Remember that this book seems to be written to a group of people who are in some distress because they face persecution due to their faith in Christ, and they're apparently wondering why they should stay faithful followers of Him when it would be easier and arguably better to go back to their old ways of doing things. Many of the details of what they were facing and the arguments they were making are very different than the sorts of situations we're likely to face, but the same basic issue is very familiar: why remain faithful to Jesus when our experience of the world is so inconsistent with the world that God apparently operates in? Why church, when the message of the church sounds great but doesn't seem to bear out in reality? Why church, when messages about heaven seem so unreal when we're earthbound?

Our passage from Hebrews for today draws a great, big line under the claim that reality is far greater and more magnificent than what we can see. Most of the time, our eyes are simply incapable of seeing the reality of our reality. It may seem like God's promises have failed. It may seem like heaven is distant and indifferent. The world may seem cold and uncaring and random. The presence of a God who is Spirit may seem immaterial to our senses that are so concrete. After all, as we've learned in previous weeks, the church tells us the truth about ourselves — that we're broken people — as well as the truth about our world — that it, too, is fallen and is not what God intended it to be, and therefore our lives can be filled with disappointment, futility, distress, cruelty, and evil.

But the author of Hebrews makes the claim that reality includes far more than just the space and time we inhabit. There is also God's space, God's reality, and though God's reality is rarely seen by our fallen eyes, it is not as distant as we think. Hebrews uses a variety of images from the Old Testament to describe the work of Jesus, and in our reading for today it uses the old Tabernacle, that ornate, mobile, tent-like focal point for worship, to describe what Jesus did through His death and resurrection. The author uses the image of a Jewish high priest entering the Most Holy Place to sprinkle sacred blood to make atonement for the nation's sins, to make things right between the people and their God. Jesus did something similar in that He shed His own blood to make atonement, and because He trusted His Father, the Father raised Him from the dead and enthroned Him as Lord. The rituals performed in the old Tabernacle were only a shadow of the greater work Christ would do: they were in a manmade tent, which, as ornate as it was, was only an imitation of God's throne room, and their work had to be done continually to be effective, whereas Jesus' sacrifice was only needed once for all.

The appearance was that Jesus was shamed and executed as a criminal. The reality is that He has overcome death and has been enthroned as Lord of heaven and earth. The appearance was that the kingdoms of this world triumphed over Him. The reality is that the throne rooms of those kingdoms can't hold a candle to Jesus' current throne. In short, the reality of what Jesus did is much greater than what our eyes can see, because the reality includes heaven, God's throne room, as well as earth. The reality includes the eternal impact of Jesus' work on humans, not just the temporary. Our universe is not all there is, and our lives are not all there is.

What's more, this signifies that time is moving in a direction. It seems to us, when we're caught in the middle of a mess, that there isn't really a point to what happens; it's just random, and time goes on and on without any real meaning. But Hebrews says that Jesus "appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself." The ages of history are

moving us forward towards God's intended finale. Time is going somewhere. Having a larger perspective on reality to include God's work expands our perspective on the events that happen to us. God is moving time in a direction, and so the events that we face are not pointless or purely random; even events that happen to us outside of God's desire for us can still serve God's desire of shaping us into Christlike people. Jesus' death and resurrection signaled a new age of God's work among humanity, and the fact that He promises to return signals that this age will come to an end, too. Just as our understanding of space is insufficient until it includes God's space, so also our understanding of history is insufficient until it includes God's plan for history.

That plan for history did not end with the work of Jesus that is recorded in our Bibles. Christ "will appear a second time;" this is why any definition of reality that does not take into account what God is doing is incomplete. He arrived once to point us to that larger reality, and He will return to usher us into it. We cannot stay too focused on the struggles and evils we face in life and get discouraged by them, because the end of the story has not yet happened.

The point that the author of Hebrews makes again and again is to remain faithful to Christ. Don't be discouraged, don't be distracted, don't be small-minded or petty, don't be selfish. You see, the point of the Bible is never just to inform us, it's to transform us. This message about the reality of the work of Christ, that space and time and history are much larger and grander and more meaningful than we realize, is not just to inform us that there is a heavenly dimension out there somewhere with a God living in it, and maybe someday if our science is advanced enough, we can prove it through evidence. No, the point is to transform us. Jesus will "appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him." This larger reality of what God is doing includes us for our transformation, our salvation, our re-creation into the people God originally intended us to be.

It's not uncommon for people to claim that reality is larger than just what we can perceive. Lots of people believe in ghosts, for example, and lots of people have vaguely-defined notions of an afterlife. But for many people, they accept a larger reality that has little impact on their current reality. They'll believe in God, or angels, or space aliens, or what have you, but it doesn't actually affect how they live. But Jesus came to our world from God's space, and He died in our world so that He could re-enter God's throne room to atone for us, and He lives forever to continue to intercede for us: reality is far bigger than we can perceive, and it changes our lives for eternity. Reality exists in a divine dance between the now and the eternal; the earthly and heavenly are embracing so that they can eventually be one, and you and I are called to be different as a result. We have an eternal focus, and our lives take on an eternal quality. Earth and heaven are in a dance, and we move in step with them.

What that means is that our larger perspective on reality gives us a larger perspective on all sorts of other things. We don't look at suffering the same way, because it is put in the perspective of heaven; suffering can become a means of learning patience and trust in God. We don't look at success the same way; we look to God's definition of success, rather than any limited notion of success. We don't look at value the same way; we place value on what lasts forever and has an impact for God's kingdom, rather than being distracted by temporary things. We don't look at other people the same way, because we see that they, too, are eternal beings who can, with God's help, become what God made them to be. No person is worth more or less than another; no person is more or less worthy of

value if everyone is called into God's reality. We can even afford to love our enemies, because of this perspective.

Jesus Christ has offered to usher us into the greater reality of what God is doing. Every one of us is called to a transformed life, a life lived in God's perspective, as a result. Where have you limited your view? Where have you limited your view of yourself, or your view of others, or your view of this world God created? Jesus Christ will return to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him. Let us wait faithfully.



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