



GRASPING THE NETTLE

NEWSLETTER

Spring / Summer 2023

Happy Easter! But Is It True?



The Garden Tomb in East Jerusalem represents a burial place typical of the early first century.

It is no coincidence that Easter is celebrated in Spring—a time of renewal and regeneration. Icons in shops range from Easter bunnies to Easter eggs. Arguably the bunnies symbolise new life in the natural world; the Easter egg originates in the stone rolled away showing the empty tomb and resurrection hope. The Easter bunny is not 'real'. It is imaginative fiction; a 'nice' comforting concept that helps children feel warm inside while enjoying the chocolate forms that commercially manufactured bunnies often take. But what about the Easter egg, indicating the living Christ had emerged from the dark imprisonment of death? Is this no more than gooey wishful thinking too? If so, the Christian faith disappears down a rabbit hole worthy of Alice in Wonderland. For 21st century people living in a world increasingly dominated by science and technology, acceptance of the supernatural can seem a step too far.



Galilee, where the resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples

Even if some can be persuaded that the intelligibility of the universe points to a transcendent mind behind it, a dead man coming back to life could seem a proposition much less able to be substantiated.

Search for Truth Charitable Trust, sponsors of GTN, recognises the need to take the sceptics' questions seriously and investigates the evidence in a new programme that will become part of an expanding *The God Question* series. As before, sceptics will have their say but in this newsletter we highlight extracts of interviews for the programme with two of the UK's foremost Christian apologists—Professors John Lennox and Alister McGrath.

"Jews say that Jesus died and didn't rise. Muslims say he didn't die. I say he both died and rose. Those are three historical claims that are mutually exclusive. How do you decide between them? It's on the basis of evidence."

John Lennox



"The implication of the resurrection is that human death is not the end of existence. This cuts a huge hole, if it's true, in the naturalistic view that death is the end and there's then only extinction. But if its true that Jesus has broken the death barrier that is phenomenally significant."

John Lennox

"The resurrection was completely unexpected. The disciples could not take it in. Then it became life-changing. What must have happened to bring about that massive change in mindset?"

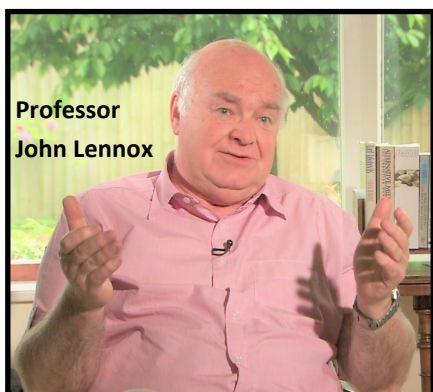
Alister McGrath

"The resurrection wasn't a product of the faith of early Christians. It was the fact of the resurrection that was the basis for their faith."

John Lennox

"In the New Testament we have multiple witnesses to Christ's resurrection and also in the Gospels. There was dawning realisation that this was of enormous importance not just for the disciples but for the world at large."

Alister McGrath



"The resurrection is not simply about the hope it brings believers: it's also about who Jesus is—the only one whom God raised from the dead."

Alister McGrath

Is It All About The Egg?

Estimates suggest that between 80 and 90 million chocolate eggs are eaten annually in Britain.

It's predicted consumers are likely to spend £415 million on Easter eggs in 2023.



76% of people in the UK associate Easter with chocolate eggs.

On the basis that “awareness is all” it could seem, on the face of it, that the message of the Christian church is alive and well. Who in the Western world has never heard of Easter and Christmas? They are massive landmarks in the annual calendar celebrated with symbols, festivities and holidays. Admittedly, sections of our woke culture promote the deletion of ‘Easter’ holidays and its replacement with ‘Spring’ holiday but the Christian terms are well rooted at least for now. The more fundamental question is what connotations do they have in people’s minds? See above!

The Church has a job to do: communicating the story of Easter and defending its truth. In some ways it *is* all about the egg—symbolising the stone that was rolled away.

Has Your Church Screened Award-Winning *Against The Tide*?

Part 1 of this cinematic film unravels the glories of the natural world as evidence for a creator. Part 2 explores the New Testament claim that this creator revealed himself in Jesus Christ. The Easter story lies at the heart of the evidence. The film helps you share the story. Purchase it on DVD/Blu-ray or web-stream at www.againstthetidemovie.org



A View From The Chair

By Very Rev Dr Martin Fair

There's nothing like settling into a comfy chair – especially if you're feeling a little tired or weary. We sit in chairs to relax in front of the TV for an hour or so and we pull up a chair to share coffee with a friend. There's nothing wrong with chairs!

Unless, that is, we become too comfortable in them. Chairs are for resting and relaxing in but not for living in. Certainly not for those who commit themselves to being followers of Jesus.

The clue is in the word; followers. Followers follow rather than being stationary. Jesus called his first disciples to follow him and as he sent them out, he invited them to become fishers of a different sort. And on that first Easter Sunday, the first witnesses went to the tomb and returned from it to tell others what they had found. All of that would have been denied them had they satisfied themselves with the view from the chair and nothing else. Grasping the Nettle has no intention of sitting still. Our mission remains ever before us. Come with us and, in line with the themes of Easter, deploy the resources featured in this newsletter in every way you can. They are designed to help the church get up and go!
Easter Blessings, Martin.



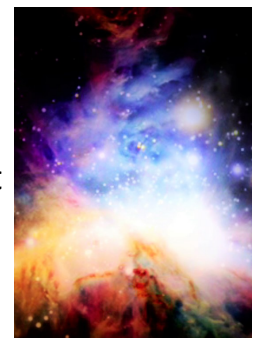
Has Your Church Explored The God Question?



Imagine a pointing finger. It's aimed at you. Behind it lies an assertion: that as a believer in a creator God you have been left intellectually marooned by the rationalism and intellectual superiority of atheism. Would you be ready to respond or would you just walk away?

There is a view on our streets that religion is no more than wishful thinking and, as atheist public commentator Sam Harris has put it, "Faith is the mother of all bad reasons". The *Exploring the God Question* series was produced to put such theses to the test. Taking three fascinating scientific journeys in the company of atheists and theists, the whole series boils down to one fundamental question: given the wonders of our existence (about which viewers become well informed), does the finger of truth point to us being ultimately the result of chance factors or a purposeful creator?

For those in a hurry, the series is also available as *The God Question for Starters*—each of the three programmes offered in 10 short extracts for discussion. For both series see www.thegodquestion.tv/explore. Did you know that GTN can help you with a taster session and/or assistance to run the course? Find out more by contacting office@graspingthenettle.org



Programme 1 explores the cosmos

Is It Time Your Church Knew More About GTN?



Rev George Lind

For more than seven years Grasping the Nettle has been highlighting for the Church, and also for the population at large, why Christianity offers a well reasoned and convincing explanation of our existence and purpose in the world. If the Church is to turn the tide of decline into one of expansion then at least a basic knowledge of what is sometimes called ‘apologetics’ is fundamentally important. How can we respond to the view that science has made God redundant? What can we say when it is claimed that the resurrection never happened, or even that Jesus never lived, or that if God exists there would be no suffering on the scale the world experiences it? How well equipped is your congregation to contribute to the conversation? How helpful would it be to fire up enthusiasm with fresh appreciation of how much evidence there is for the truth of Christianity? That’s where GTN can assist in a variety of ways. Why not start by inviting our Liaison Officer, Rev George Lind, to make a presentation on GTN or even help you engage with the agenda using some of our resources? Simply write to office@graspingthenettle.org to start the conversation.

It Happened Here!

As we celebrate the Easter story we scarcely can do so without a series of images forming in our minds. Why not root imagination in reality on a tour to Israel led by archaeologist and Israeli government accredited tour guide John Sode-Woodhead? John has been a speaker in GTN. His session is available to view in the [Watch](#) section of the website.

The Suffering Enigma

Why Does God Allow It?



One answer to the question above is that there is suffering because there is no God and suffering is just the way the world is. Yet significantly, suffering lies at the heart of the Easter story. Christians look at the centre cross and may see that, through the

crucifixion, God has fully entered into our suffering.

However, for others, the existence of pain and distress is the ultimate evidence that there is no God of love presiding over the universe. Search for Truth Charitable Trust is addressing the issue in yet another new programme to be added to *The God Question* series.

Below are some interviewee quotations representing atheist and theist perspectives.

"You might look upon the cross as God's way of displaying to us the suffering that he is willing to put himself through for the sake of a relationship with humanity. That gives us a new perspective on it." **Peter S Williams**

"We might think that a loving God would create a world that's pain free but when you look at how love operates it has to give a certain amount of freedom; it has to be vulnerable to be real love." **Bethany Sollereeder**

"Little girls who get run over by buses; infants who don't even live to the first month of life who are guilty of nothing; innocent people who die in earthquakes. You can see what an illogical philosophy belief in God is." **Sam Harris**

"I was woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of an animal capturing another. I could hear the cries of horror from the captured beast and at that moment I felt it's impossible that God exists." **Quentin Smith**

"At the heart of Christianity there is resurrection. But before that, there is a cross, there is suffering. God does not remain distant from human suffering but has himself become part of it." **John Lennox**

"The world that we now see is not the world God wanted it to be. It's a fallen world. It's a broken and wounded world that calls out for healing and being made whole." **Alister McGrath**

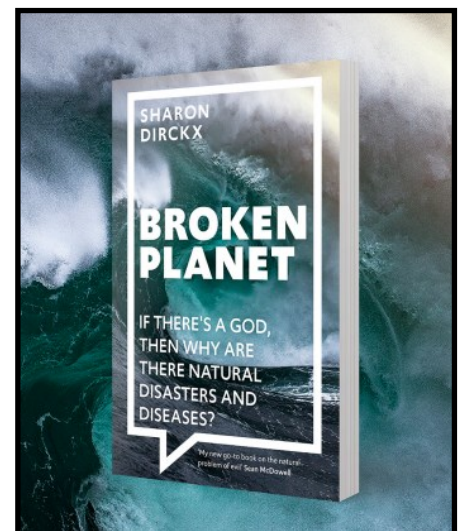
Broken Planet

Interrogating the Why

Suffering is a multi-faceted problem for the world. Clearly some pain is deliberately inflicted by the perverse actions of individuals, political leaders among them. Might we safely say that God is not to blame for those? The devastation caused by natural disasters brings a different level of challenge to those who argue for a loving, all powerful God. Images from Turkey, Syria and Mississippi strike terror and confusion in our hearts.



On 29th March GTN invited Dr Sharon Dirckx to help us face up to the challenges of asking why. But why Sharon Dirckx? An author of two books on the problem of God and suffering, the latest is Broken Planet in which she specifically focuses on the moral dilemmas raised for Christians by the existence and consequences of natural disasters. In a highly thought provoking presentation Dr Dirckx brought fresh perspectives to this topic that may not fully answer the 'why' question but disarm it considerably. You can view the session, from Easter onwards, in the [Watch](#) section of the GTN website www.graspingthenettle.org.



Watch GTN

GTN is always on the move—especially in its online form with a regular rollout of sessions with world renowned speakers on topics that matter. This year, in addition to the session featured on page 7, there have been two other events in the first quarter.

GTN has three popular online strands:

Exploring Further, WOW and The Interviews—a brand new series drawing upon the archives of Kharis Productions and featuring previously unseen content from interviews with world renowned experts. First into the arena was Oxford University Professor Alister McGrath. He



is the author of so many books he is unable to say specifically how many he has written! A lot! The recorded interview, from which highlights were featured in the session, were on the topics of The Resurrection and Suffering. What is Alister McGrath's core thinking on these critical topics? You can find out by visiting the [Watch](#) section of the website. Professor McGrath was present for the whole session in order to make additional comments and participate in the Q&A.



Prof Chris Packard, vascular biochemist

The WOW series is one of GTN's popular brands. The title encapsulates the response we typically have to learning more about the sheer wonders of our existence. In WOW events GTN has been focusing on astonishing features of the human body. Earlier this year the digestive system came under the spotlight. The presenters were the 'in-house' team of Professor Chris Packard and Dr Rose Mary Harley, both members of the Board of Search for Truth Charitable Trust, sponsors of GTN. The

wonders of the digestive system were indeed startling; a process so finely coordinated enabling our bodies to derive the nutrients we need. And there's another WOW factor: the nutrients so essential to our well-being are available from the food we harvest from our fruitful earth. WOW indeed!



Dr Rose Mary Harley, microbiologist

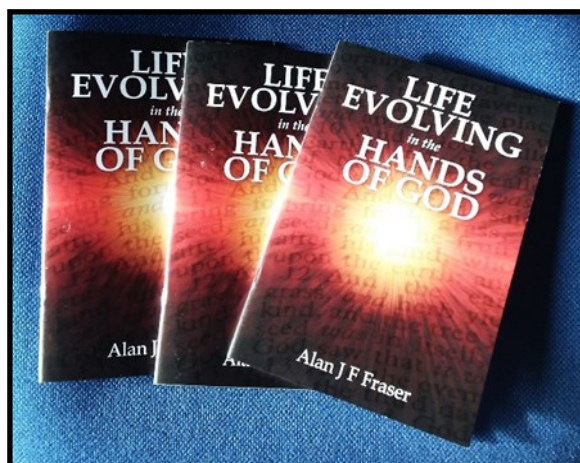
Given that our bodies are so wonderful there is a responsibility on us to maintain them as best we can. For that reason there were also two visual presentations—on macronutrients (we need carbohydrates, proteins and fats) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). Experience the WOW factor in the [Watch](#) section of the website www.graspingthenettle.org.

Unpicking The Knot

Dr Alan Fraser on Evolution and the Bible

Nailing his theological colours to the proverbial mast, scientist Alan Fraser begins his recent publication *Life Evolving in the Hands of God* with the quotation “All scripture is God breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). But what the author says next is fundamentally significant. “However, human understanding of the Biblical data is far from infallible, as is human understanding of scientific data. Misunderstandings on both fronts open up the possibility of an apparent clash between the Bible and science.”

One of the most electrifying flash points in the science/God debate has been the topic of evolution. Although there is evidence that the leadership of the Anglican church was largely open to Darwin’s revolutionary thesis in 1859, the evolutionary paradigm sits very uneasily, for some, with a Biblical view of creation. Dr Alan Fraser is convinced that the conflict model is unnecessary. In just 47 pages of a well written and clearly presented booklet, he explains why.



Clearly influenced by famous Scottish scientists James Clerk Maxwell and Donald M Mackay, as well as Princeton theologian Benjamin B Warfield, the author arranges his evidence and argument in 3 clear sections: Perspective of Scripture, Perspective of Science and How Christians Reacted. For such a small volume, the author synthesises and expounds his views based on an impressive range of sources. Indeed the bibliography offered at the end of the work cites more than 20 books relevant to the main topic of scripture and evolution.

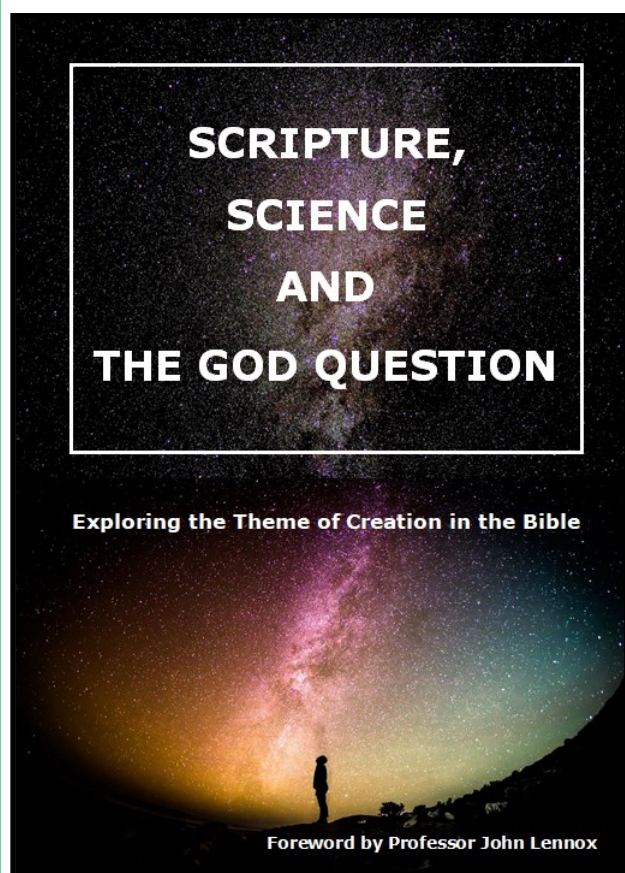
For anyone looking for a concise summary of the evidence for evolution and how it might be understood in relation to scriptural perspectives, this booklet will be invaluable. Priced £5, it is available from Handsel Press, Amazon or directly from the author via alan@tambo.me.uk.



Alan Fraser has a BSc in Chemistry and a PhD in Crystallography from Edinburgh University. Having been a teacher in Peru and Scotland, he has maintained a life long interest in the relationship between scripture and science. Dr Fraser is on the GTN Council of Advisers.

Scripture, Science and The God Question

8x Bible Studies Linked by the Theme of Creation

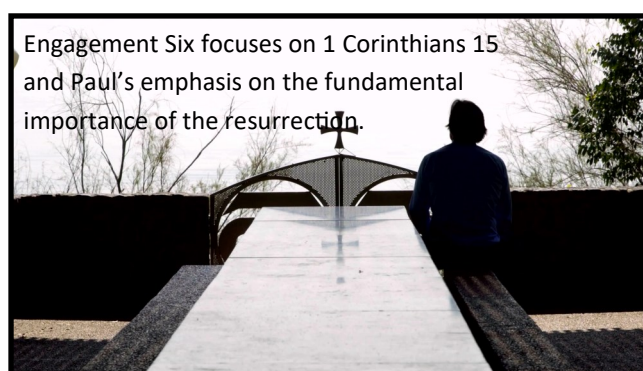


Designed for individual and group use, the publication presents a wealth of contextual information as well as encouraging both the study of the Scripture text and meditation on it. Questions for study and reflection are given for each of the 8 passages under consideration.

For further information on this inspiring new publication write to office@graspingthenettle.org.

As the title suggests, this new publication from Search for Truth Enterprises is not just about what the Bible says. Each passage for study comes with information about the light shed on each topic by contemporary studies—sometimes in science and sometimes in history. As Professor Alister McGrath has noted, *“Science cannot tell us how to interpret the Bible but at times it can point to interpretations that are probably not correct”*.

The theme of creation is found in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Especially in the New Testament it is often preceded by the word ‘new’. God’s new creation of human beings is integrally linked to the fact of Christ’s resurrection. No surprise then that the sixth of the eight studies focuses on the fundamental importance of Christ rising from the dead, “according to the Scriptures”. It is the heart of the Easter message.

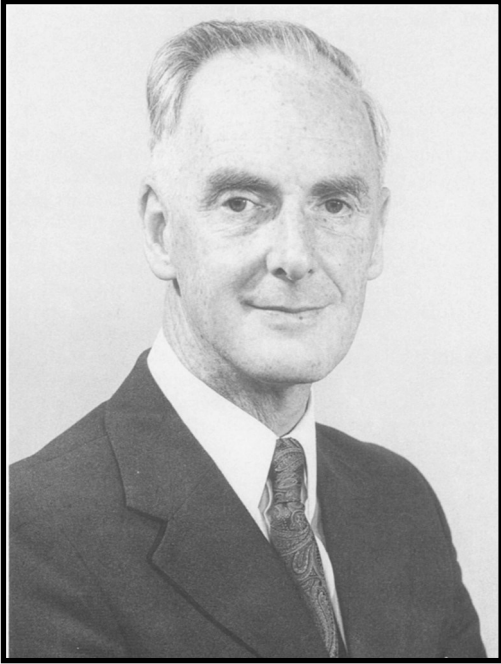


Supporting GTN Financially

Thanks to all who support GTN by participating in events, promotion of activities and, not least of all, with financial support. Donations to GTN can be given at www.graspingthenettle.org/donate.

GTN is an interdenominational initiative of churches in Scotland, using Exploring the God Question as its key resource. It is administered by Search for Truth Charitable Trust (Charity No: SC039465. Company No: SC340300), a registered charity and private limited company registered in Scotland.

On The Shoulders of Giants



Donald M Mackay 1922-1987

Just as in technology and in medicine we build on what has previously been achieved, so it is in Christian apologetics. One of Scotland's giants in that regard was Donald M Mackay who was born just over 100 years ago. Here Dr Alan Fraser pays tribute. You can read the whole article in the Blog section of the GTN website.

Donald Mackay was born in Lybster, attending Wick High School for his secondary education followed by St Andrews University and King's College London where he gained his PhD. During that time he was involved in radar research, so vital for the allied cause in WWII. Later he was appointed professor at the

Department of Communication and Neuroscience at Keele University where he earned a worldwide reputation for his work in information theory and the theory of brain organisation, rubbing shoulders with the big names in the world of science.

He published a number of books in the area of science and faith, influencing a generation of Christian thinkers. Some of the better-known titles include: "The Clockwork Image", "Brains, Machines and Persons", "Science, Chance and Providence" and "The Open Mind".

Complementarity

One of Donald Mackay's several contributions to apologetics was the concept 'complementarity'. There exists more than one explanation for most things that happen. A book may well be studied by examining the paper and ink used and producing a scientifically accurate report on what it is as a physical object, its dimensions, its weight, the colour of the ink and its chemical composition. However, the author would not be very happy with such a limited description of their book. To them and to their readership it forms a message: it tells us something. The analysis of a reviewer would have nothing to say about the book's physical qualities but a lot to say about its literary merits. Which description is true? Both are. In the same way, a description of the brain as a material object and a description of the immaterial thinking faculty of a human being are both valid. We are very glad of the expert knowledge doctors have, especially when our bodies malfunction, but there is more to a human being than the body. We are persons—loved by God. Donald Mackay applied this complementarity approach to alleged contradictions between the Bible and science.