



THE GREAT AMERICAN ECLIPSE AND OUR CREATURELY SENSE OF WONDER

A Bible Study by Charles P. Arand



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Editor's note: Professor Chuck Arand prepared this Bible study for congregations and small groups as we prepare for the total solar eclipse on August 21, 2017. Pastors and Bible study leaders are encouraged to adapt this study for their own purposes. It can be used as a one-time study or as a study over 2-3 sessions.

On August 21, an astronomical event will take place that will capture the attention of the world—especially those of us in North America—namely, a total solar eclipse. It will cross the United States from Oregon to Florida. Large numbers of people will be in the “path of totality” (ominous sounding, isn't it?). That means, they will be able to see the complete/total solar eclipse. Those just outside its path will see part of it.

Towns within the path of this “Great American Eclipse” (as it has been called by some) have prepared for a great influx of visitors from near and far who want to get the best vantage point for seeing the eclipse (make sure you have rated solar eclipse glasses). In fact, one town in Tennessee is expecting 100,000 visitors (<http://mentalfloss.com/article/501542/how-eclipse-chasers-are-putting-small-kentucky-town-map>).

Visitors will include those whose hobby is to chase total eclipses around the globe and are willing to travel just about anywhere in the world to see one (<http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/31/weather/total-solar-eclipse-2017-chasers-video/index.html>). Some of them made hotel reservations several years in advance. Others have only recently become aware of the eclipse and plan on stepping outside or taking the day off in order to go see the eclipse.

1. What have you heard about the eclipse?
2. What stories have you heard about preparations for the event or about people who plan on attending it.
3. Will you be watching? Why or why not?
4. Additional Resources:
 - a. American Astronomical Association — <https://eclipse.aas.org/>
 - b. NASA and Eclipses — <https://eclipse2017.nasa.gov/faq>
 - c. Eclipse Eyeglass Safety — <https://eclipse2017.nasa.gov/safety>

A Sense of Wonder

Many regard a total solar eclipse as one of the most spectacular events in nature, since, at the moment of totality, the corona, that is, the outer diaphanous atmosphere of the sun (see <https://eclipse.aas.org/>) becomes visible. Total eclipses have often elicited strong psychological and emotional responses from people in every society throughout the history of the world.

In the past, those responses often took the form of amazement, bewilderment, and fear. In many ancient societies a total eclipse was seen as a sign of impending doom. In this regard, an eclipse became one of the most famous in history when it coincided with the death of King Henry I on August 2, 1133. A struggle for the throne ensued that cast England into civil war (see <https://eclipse2017.nasa.gov/faq>).

Today, events like total eclipses continue to have the ability to re-awaken a childlike sense of wonder. Think back for a moment and identify a couple moments from childhood (or adulthood) when you were filled with wonder.

What is wonder? How would you define it? Some have suggested that it is one of our most basic human emotions. Martha Nussbaum, an ethicist at the University of Chicago, has suggested that there are several components to our experience of wonder.¹ Among these, we might include:

1. First, there is an element of surprise to it. Something catches our attention and stops us in our tracks. We stare at it. Our jaws may even drop as we gape at it. It draws us out of ourselves.
2. But perhaps even more than that, it captures our full attention. As Nussbaum puts it, we become “maximally aware” of the object and “minimally aware” of our relation to the object. In other words, it has a way of drawing us out of ourselves.
3. Second, wonder has a way of arousing our curiosity and even empathy (Nussbaum). How does that bird (like an American kestrel or hummingbird) hover in the wind like that?
4. Finally, we might even be filled with awe or reverence whereby we want to drop to our knees as an expression of humility or thankfulness for witnessing it. Abraham Heschel writes about wonder’s cousin, awe: “Unlike fear, [awe] does not make us shrink from the awe-inspiring object, but, on the contrary, draws us near to it.”²

Why do you think events like a solar eclipse fill us with wonder? I suspect a number of reasons come into play.

A somewhat common and perhaps superficial reason that events like a total solar eclipse are awe-inspiring is because we don’t see them often. But does the rarity of an event alone explain it? Children constantly experience wonder for things that we take for granted. So might there be other reasons for our wonder?

I will suggest that wonder occurs because we are creatures. In fact, wonder is a natural response of a creature to the world in which we find ourselves. Why? There are at least two reasons. First, we encounter a world that we did not create. Why does it exist? Second, we encounter a world that we can to some extent study and understand how it works. How is that possible?

A Sense of Wonder for the Creator

We experience a sense of wonder because we intuitively sense that there is more going on here than meets the eye. Something bigger lies behind this event and world. We might suggest several reasons for such wonder.

First, we experience wonder for this world and events like a total solar eclipse because we are encountering events and a world that we did not make. In other words, it is a natural human reaction to respond with wonder to events that we did not cause and that we do not control.

Read Psalm 19:1-2. How does David respond to the night sky? Why does he respond the way he does? There is more here than meets the eye. Have you had any similar reactions when you see photographs taken by the Hubble telescope?

Read Job 42:1-6. Why does Job respond the way he does? Job's exclamation takes place after God has taken him upon a whirlwind tour of the universe where he saw the astronomical wonders, geological wonders, meteorological wonders, and zoological wonders of God's creation. How does it provide a fitting exclamation point to the question that God asked Job in chapter 38:4?

Second, we know WHO created it. In other words, it is one thing to know that it was created or even that some divine being that we call "God" created it. But it is another thing to know the identity of the one who created it.

Read Colossians 1:15-20 (see also John 1:1-3). How does Paul describe the role of Christ within creation? In redemption? How does this connection better help us understand both the nature of creation and the nature of redemption?

Have you ever thought of Christ as both our Creator and our Redeemer or have you only thought of him as our Redeemer? Why or why not? What difference might it make to see that it is not just God the Father but also Jesus the Son who participated in creating the world we experience all around us? Why don't we speak about Christ as the one who created all things?

Third, one of the longest standing questions in philosophy is this: *Why is there something rather than nothing?* As Christians, we know WHY God created it. Not only were we not there when it all came into existence, but NONE of it had to be! There was no need or compulsion for God to create. So why did God create?

Read Psalm 135:6. What reasons does David give for why God does what he does? Does this mean that God is somehow arbitrary or capricious? Why or why not?

Read Romans 4:17. What does it mean for God "to call into existence things that did not exist?" What does Paul mean here? What is the immediate context? What does this say about God?

When Christians confess that God created the heavens and the earth, we confess that God created everything out of nothing. This is nothing other than to say that God did not have to create. There was no internal need for God to create and there was nothing outside of God compelling him to create. Instead, God created for the love of it! God created because he wanted to share his life and his love with that which was not God.

In fact, we see that this is God's *modus operandi*. This is how God works. God creates out of love (without any merit or worthiness in me) and he redeems (without any merit or worthiness in me). Both creation and redemption spring from the same extravagant, generous love of God.

All people experience wonder, Christians and non-Christians alike. So, is there a Christian difference? Does it make a difference not only to experience wonder for the marvelous beauty of this world, but to know that it was created out of love?

Consider a blueberry pie. I love blueberry pies. I marvel at them. But it is one thing to have wonder for a blueberry pie. I can analyze the flakiness of the crust, the sweetness of the berries, etc. But it is an entirely different thing to know that my wife baked that pie for me out of love. That brings my wonder to an entirely different level as I know who made it and why. So also with the Christian.

A Sense of Wonder for God's Creation

As Christians, we experience wonder not only for Christ the creator who made all things for the “love of them,” but we also wonder at the world itself—the works of his hands. And here lies another of the great mysteries that puzzles scientists, namely, *why are we able to comprehend the world?* Consider this famous quote by Albert Einstein:

“You consider it strange that I sense the comprehensibility of the world (in so far as we are justified to speak of it) as a wonder (*Wunder*) or an external mystery (*ewiges Geheimnis*). Now, *a priori* one should expect a chaotic world which can in no way be grasped by thought. One could (better, should) expect that the world should prove subject to law only in so far as we intervene by putting order ourselves. It would be a type of orderliness like the alphabetic order of the words of a language. On the contrary, the kind of orderliness which results, for instance, from Newton’s theory of gravitation is of an entirely different character. Even though the axioms of the theory are set down by man, the success of such an enterprise presupposes a high level of order in the objective world which we have no *a priori* right to expect. There lies the ‘Wonder’ which increases steadily with the development of our knowledge. Here lies the weak point of the positivists and professional atheists who feel happy in the consciousness that they have not only successfully dedivinized (*entgöttert*) but even dewonderized (*entwundert*) the world” [15].”³

So what does it mean that we are able to not only experience wonder for our world, but wonder that we are even able to comprehend the world?

First, as Christians, we express wonder for creation as *creation* and not as being in some way divine. In other words, we are able to see it for what it is (God’s treasured handiwork) and not for what we want it to be (this includes how we see each other). In the ancient world, many civilizations deified and worshipped celestial bodies like the sun and the moon.

Read Genesis 1:14-19. How does Genesis refer to them? Why doesn’t it specify “sun” and “moon”? Note how Genesis demotes them by not even giving them a name. They are simply called the “greater light” and the “lesser light.”

Second, as Christians, when we acknowledge things like the sun and moon as creatures we are not devaluing them. To the contrary, we value them for what they are and, just as importantly, for the role/vocation God has given them. There is a sense (especially in Psalm 104) that everything has been given a place and role or vocation. They are given a function and a purpose within God’s world.

Read Genesis 1:11:13 and Psalm 104:19. What are the specific functions of the sun and the moon for life on earth? Sun provides energy that supports life...when we eat food we are basically consuming the energy of the sun through the miracle of photosynthesis. At the same time, the earth’s magnetic field keeps the solar wind from ripping our atmosphere away. Likewise, the moon plays an important role in the tides of the earth, etc. In other words, everything has a place and a purpose in God’s creation (some of which we cannot discern).

Third, As Christians, we can marvel that God has partnered with the world to carry out his purposes by giving it a “relative autonomy” (a phrase used by my Concordia Seminary colleague Joel Okamoto). That is to say, we can study how the world works. We are able to discover its chemical elements and physical properties. We can mathematically discern the orbits and speeds of everything from planets to galaxies.

Read Psalm 8: Is wonder, curiosity, and comprehensibility part of our commission to look after the world so that all life flourishes? God not only made us in his image to give us a special relationship with him, but has given us “reason and all my senses” (Luther’s Small Catechism) by which we can explore this world, understand this world to some extent (thereby giving rise to the sciences and other disciplines), and exercise a benevolent dominion that reflects God’s own loving dominion by which he made room in his life for that which was not God.

Concluding Thought from Martin Luther

Events like the Great American Eclipse may capture our attention because they seem so rare, so out of the ordinary, indeed, extraordinary. And there is nothing wrong with being fascinated by events like total solar eclipses. But we also shouldn’t forget that our world is filled with wonders all around us. We often forget them because they are so “ordinary.” We take them for granted. Luther laments,

[Most people] are so accustomed to [the works of God in nature]; they are as permeated with them as an old house is with smoke; they use them and wallow around in them like a sow in an oats sack. Oh, they say, is it so marvelous that the sun shines? That fire heats? That water contains fish? That hens lay eggs? That the earth yields grain? That a cow bears calves? That a woman gives birth to children? Why, this happens every day! You dear dolt Hans, must it be insignificant because it happens daily? ... If God created all other women and children of bone, as He did Eve, and but one woman were able to bear children, I maintain that the whole world, kings and lords, would worship her as a divinity. But now that every woman is fruitful, it passes for nothing. ... Is it not vexing to see the accursed ingratitude and blindness of mankind?⁴

One of the many blessings of studying God’s Word is how it open our eyes and ears and all our senses to see how everything that takes place each and every day is a wonder and miracle of God. As Luther elsewhere put it, “to create is always to make something new.” God is continually creating and re-creating, making all things new.

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 53-55. See also Jesse Prinz who deals with these various components of wonder <http://aeon.co/magazine/psychology/why-wonder-is-the-most-human-of-all-emotions/>. In terms of wonder from a biblical perspective, see William P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonders: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) for a comprehensive treatment of wonder.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1955), 77.

³ Cantore. Translated from A. Einstein, *Lettres à Maurice Solovine* (Paris : Gauthier-Villars, 1956), p. 114; letter dated March 30, 1952. *Wonder and Awe: The Scientific Experience of Ultimates*, Enrice Cantore.

⁴ Quoted in Martin E. Marty, “Simul: A Lutheran Reclamation Project in the Humanities,” *The Cresset*, XLV (December 1981): 7–14. Accessed at http://thecresset.org/Marty/Dec_1981.html.



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