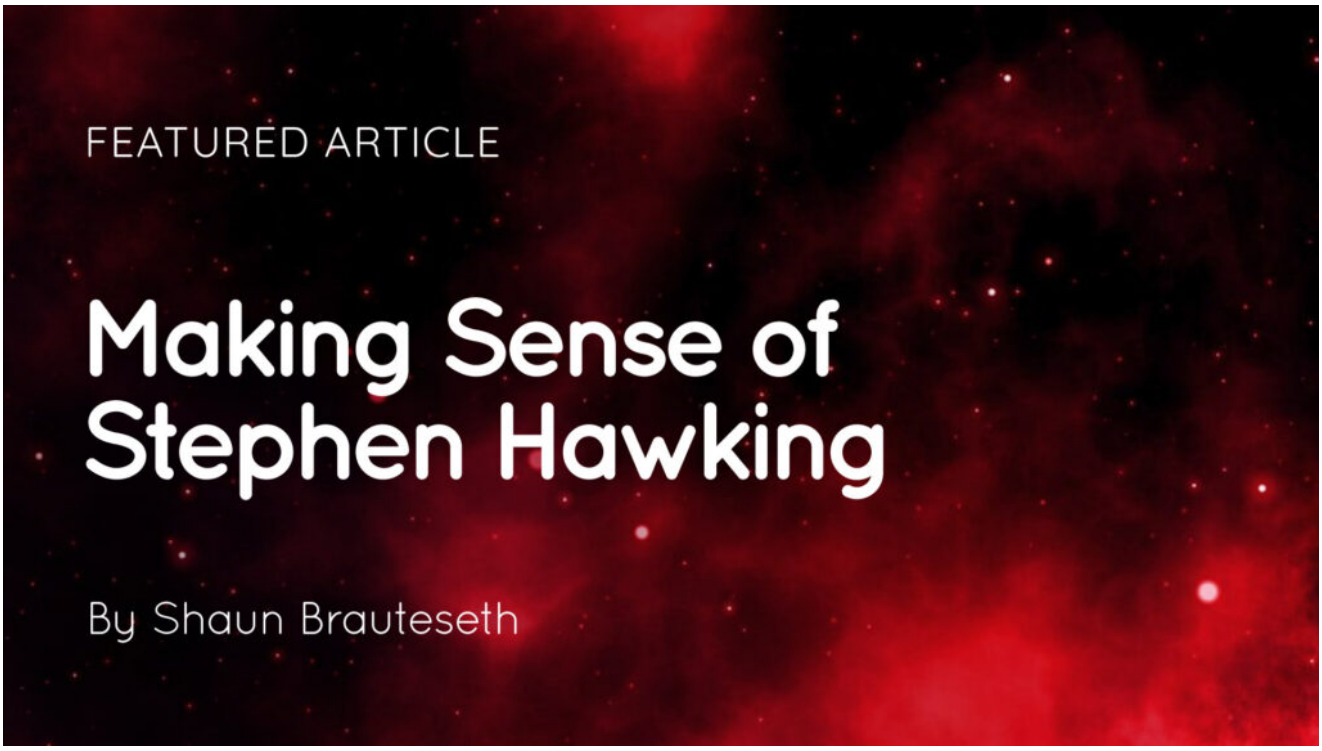
Making Sense of Stephen Hawking

Shaun Brauteseth 22 March 2018



There's a story about Stephen Hawking's motorised wheelchair. He allegedly took great delight in riding its wheels over Prince Charles' toes during an official meeting with the royal heir. His only regret? He hadn't been able to do the same with Margaret Thatcher.

One of the modern age's brightest minds was finally stilled this month at the age of 76 – far longer than he was expected to live, but not nearly long enough to fully explore the vast reaches of the universe. "Do not go gentle into that good night," the poet Dylan Thomas once wrote. "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Stephen Hawking's fierce mind raged against his useless body for the better part of five decades, having been diagnosed with motor neuron disease at the age of 21. He was a cosmologist and a theoretical physicist, devoting his life to exploring the complexities of time and space, and would have been judged by history as a brilliant man, regardless of his physical circumstances. But his crumpled, atrophied shell of a body – able to address audiences only through a robotic voice powered by his cheek movements – only amplified the mind it housed. As his gnarled frame lay in his wheelchair, he – and we – only had his mind to reckon with. And what a mind.

Too Smart to Accept God

There was something else about his formidable brain, though: it was "too smart" to accept the

idea of God. Hawking was, quite famously, an atheist, albeit with a shrug of the shoulders rather than a twist of the dagger. He sulked his way towards the possibility of some kind of God out there, but ultimately believed that science provided a more convincing explanation. (In 2011 he called the concept of heaven "a fairy story", and in his final years repeatedly reinforced his rejection of God.) Of course, the international press gleefully trotted out all his anti-God, anti-afterlife statements in the wake of his death, as if the philosophical musings of a brilliant scientist offer conclusive proof that God is a myth. Because, hey – the guy was the smartest human being alive, and look at his conclusion.

> "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.."

Thing is, God got there before us. He beat Stephen Hawking, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and every other sophisticated scholar to their own punchline. He told us this would happen. He gave us our incredible intellect, but warned us that it was the very thing that could prevent us from entering His kingdom. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God," wrote a high-functioning intellectual named Paul who'd once thought differently himself. He was writing it to the Corinthians, themselves citizens of a Roman colony full of ambition and ideas. He then went on to quote words written 700 years before by the prophet Isaiah: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." This paradox of smart people rejecting God is not a new thing. Does it mean that God does not want people to be clever – to use their intellect, reasoning and curiosity? Not at all. It just means that when we set out to uncover a God that our minds can accept, and who does things the way we expect Him to, we may just become offended by what we find, and what we don't.

The Black Hole in the Human Heart

"Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet," Hawking once said. "Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious." He applied his understanding to the general theory of relativity, models of physical cosmology and quantum gravity, but could not accept the archaic concept of sin. He reached for the heavens, but could not believe heaven would reach for him. He went far, far out into realms we can never physically touch, but could not go inside himself. He spent literal decades theorising about black holes in space, but could never address the black hole in the human heart.

> He had time to face down his own mortality and repent; he just refused to.

Joseph Stalin's daughter reported that her father's last act on his deathbed was to rise up and shake his fist towards the sky one final time before lying back down and dying. Philosopher Bertrand Russell lived to 97, a depressed, unmoved atheist for virtually his entire life. Christopher Hitchens, author of 'God is Not Great', died of oesophagal cancer in 2011, an atheist to his dying breath. He had time to face down his own mortality and repent; he just refused to.

No Smug Satisfaction, Only Heartache

We can be tempted to feel a sense of smug satisfaction, knowing that these giant intellectuals have had the shock of their lives and that their great castles of arrogance crumbled the second their hearts stopped beating. That they are most definitely theists (meaning they now have a belief in the existence of a God) right now. That they could not have been more wrong, and now know it. But there is no joy, no victory, no sense of vindication. There is only heartache. Stephen Hawking was dead for a moment and is now alive again. He now has a new body, but that new body will be assigned a destination, and it will be the destination that his heart and mind have chosen.

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"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" God asked in Ezekiel 18:23. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" The world is full of intellectually enlightened people who have no time for fairy stories about snakes, apples, floods, plagues, and a man nailed to a cross. They laugh at the naivety of these things, but we would be wrong to laugh when they inevitably meet their Maker. We should be filled with grief, moved with sorrow, that another person has rejected the forgiveness God has offered.

Stephen Hawking raged against the dying of the light, but he could not stop it. There is no more theory for him – just unchanging reality. His great mind could conceive of entire universes, but would not dare imagine that there was a God who cared about him. The blackest hole was not in outer space but inside himself – he just could not, would not, see it. The world honours the life of a great thinker, and some in the Christian faith may celebrate the final reckoning of an arrogant man, but we would do well to see the reality: there are Stephen Hawkings all around us, everywhere we go, every day. They're at work, at school, at university, at the gym, in coffee shops. They live on God's planet and breathe air He created through lungs that He fashioned. They use brains He created to decide He is not real, and then go on with their lives to prove it.

Stirred to Prayer & Acts of Love

But we are not filled with thoughts of vindication. We are stirred to prayer and acts of love and

grace. When we reason, we do it through eyes filled with compassion, tenderness, truth and tears. It's a beautiful kind of foolishness. It's the foolishness of the cross of Jesus; of the One who transcends theory; the One who actually holds space and time, and the One who loved Stephen Hawking enough to die for him.

It is theorised that out of every hundred people who don't believe in God, one will read the Bible and ninety-nine will read the Christian. And when they do read us, may we not be full of clever counter-arguments, but love: glorious, foolish, heavenly love.