

Stephen Hawking's despair vs. Billy Graham's hope Doug Hayhoe, March 2025

The greatest scientist of my lifetime and the greatest preacher died a month apart. What hope did they leave us with?

Stephen Hawking's final warning

In June 2017, I attended Stephen Hawking's last [Starmus Festival](#), in Trondheim, Norway. I had always wondered what it was like when the sky didn't get dark at night. But more important, as a physics enthusiast, I had always thought it would be neat to see Hawking in person (Figure 1), the greatest physicist since Einstein. (See my essay [Time, Science, and Faith](#).)

Alas! Hawking was too sick to attend. He was still the keynote speaker, however, coming in live. His message reflected despair at the great challenges facing us. Near the end of his life, he had so little hope for our survival that he proposed sending people to another planet [to start a new civilization there](#). Not, only, were we facing the possibility of *nuclear war*, a *global pandemic*, and runaway *climate change*, each of which could wipe out the human species. But the greatest threat, in his view, was that of *artificial intelligence* surpassing human intelligence, and replacing humankind altogether. Let's briefly look at each of these.



Figure 1 Stephen Hawking in 2016.
Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard Staff
Photographer

Nuclear war, a global pandemic, and climate change

When I taught introductory physics to teenagers, I always enjoyed the unit on nuclear physics. It focused on understanding Canada's [Candu reactor](#) system, and the key contribution nuclear energy makes to Ontario's electrical grid. We also discussed its negative aspects such as the danger of an all-out nuclear war. The [Cuban Missile crises](#) of 1962, when the Soviets tried to set up nuclear armed missiles in Cuba, was still strong in my memory. But that was 60 years ago.

Now, it seems like we're back in the same scenario with even more countries ready to use nuclear weapons in a war. It's no surprise that Annie Jacobsen's bestseller, [Nuclear War: A Scenario](#) (2024), begins with North Korea firing an unprovoked ballistic missile towards the United States. What can we do about this, other than praying? Thankfully, there are many Christian groups strongly opposed to nuclear weapons. But are they having an effect?

Hawking's second concern was a global pandemic. When COVID arrived in 2019, I wrote about how my grandparents had died in the 1919 flu epidemic, when my father was just three. (See my essay [Natural Disasters](#).) These pandemics were a century apart. But, now, a new challenge is on the horizon. As a journalist puts it, ["We're running out of chances to stop Bird Flu."](#) We'll hopefully get this under control; but this is how global pandemics begin.

Hawking third concern was climate change, which he saw as a huge threat to our civilization. Many people downplay its seriousness, but Hawking knew better. The atmospheric lifetime of CO₂ is 100 years. We have to take action now to avoid the worst that might happen in 50 years. Meanwhile, like having a too heavy blanket on at night – one of my daughter's metaphors – we

will continue to suffer from over-heating. If we wait another generation, it may be too late. It might even happen sooner, if a large ice sheet on Greenland loosens and slides into the ocean, causing a world crisis in sea level. (My essay, [The Science of Climate Change](#), covers this topic in detail. My eldest daughter, Katharine, has much more on the subject, easily found on the web.)

Artificial Intelligence

Perhaps Hawking's greatest concern was artificial intelligence. Currently, AI is not only an important tool for researchers, but is available for everyone to use. How do you know, for example, that it wasn't *ChatGPT* who researched and wrote this essay?! Nevertheless, Hawking saw into the future when AI would become so powerful it would eventually replace humans.

This warning may seem fanciful. But Geoffrey Hinton, who was just awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize in Physics for discoveries and inventions at the heart of artificial intelligence, agrees with Hawking. (See, for example, [this interview](#) on CNN.)

"Intelligence only addresses the *what*, demonstrated in efficiency, capacity, and accuracy. Wisdom addresses the *why*, encapsulating the moral compass, discernment, sound judgment."

AI researcher, Joanna Ng, worked for seven years as Director of the Center for Advanced Studies at IBM Canada. In her article in [Christianity Today](#), she pointed out that while AI may surpass humans in most areas of knowledge and intelligence, humans have a unique God-given sense of wisdom that machines, not made in God's image, cannot possess. She writes, "Intelligence only addresses the *what*, demonstrated in efficiency, capacity, and accuracy. Wisdom addresses the *why*, encapsulating the moral compass, discernment, sound judgment." She adds, "the effects of wisdom [are] harmony, peace, justice ... righteousness, purity, love." Think what we will lose if AI replaces most human functions in society!

Some scholars take the opposite tack from Hawking and argue that things are not as bad as we make out. Hannah Richie's [Not the end of the World](#) (2024) is one of these books. She admits, however, that "A sustainable future is not guaranteed - if we want it, we need to create it." That's much easier said than done.

Billy Graham

When Stephen Hawking passed away, on the 14th of March, 2018, I remember feeling a certain emptiness within. More than any other living scientist, he best epitomized the scientific world I had grown to love. But I was also sad at seeing him end his life with despair.

But Billy Graham (Figure 2) had just passed away a month before Stephen Hawking, on the 18th of February, 2018. And more than any other Christian leader, he best epitomized the spiritual world I had grown to love. Only instead of being a messenger of despair, Graham was known as "[a preacher of hope.](#)"

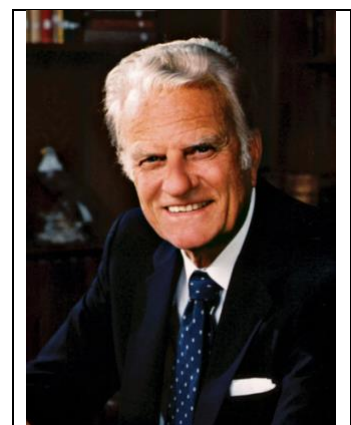


Figure 2 Billy Graham

To hear Billy Graham in person, I didn't have to travel to another country. I had heard him preach at crusades in Toronto over a spread of 40 years, as I describe in my essay *Toronto, Then and Now*. He was unique in many ways. He was able to cooperate with a wide variety of Christians in his crusades, without compromising his core message of salvation through faith, or

his other Biblical convictions. He lived a very public life for fifty years without any taint of scandal or impropriety. And he and his family lived modestly, despite tens of millions of people being influenced by his preaching and leadership.

It was remarkable that during the cold war, Graham was able to have a crusade in the communist countries of Yugoslavia in 1967 and Romania in 1985. In 1982, he attended a peace conference in Moscow, sponsored by the Russian Orthodox Church. Finally, in 1992, he had a crusade in Moscow attended by 155,000 people. Many Christians criticized Graham for speaking in communist countries and visiting communist Russia. But after the Soviet Union had dissolved, they realized that he was ahead of his time.

Billy Graham and the threats facing us

Billy Graham had no illusions about the very serious threats facing the earth. Although he lived mostly before the threat of artificial intelligence, he was concerned about the environment and our stewardship of it. And he well knew the great danger of nuclear war, having lived through the 1962 Cuban Crises as I had. In fact, he [spoke against nuclear war](#) in a 1982 visit to Providence, New England. And his visit to Moscow that same year was in the shadow of the world nuclear standoff between Russia and the U.S. (See his [interview](#) with *Sojourner's* magazine in 1979.)

Billy Graham's future hope versus Stephen Hawking's lack of hope

When asked about his views on life, death, and the afterlife, Stephen Hawking said this,

“I have lived with the prospect of an early death for the last 49 years. I’m not afraid of death, but I’m in no hurry to die. I have so much I want to do first. I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.” ([New York Times](#)).

Hawking had lots of opportunities to hear the Christian message. It was shared and lived out by sincere believers close to him. His first wife, Jane, was a Bible believing Christian, as the movie *The Theory of Everything* (2014) makes clear. Also, the Canadian theoretical physicist Don Page, who lived with Hawking as a student, and collaborated with him on some of his papers on black holes, is an evangelical Christian. Page even took Hawking to a Baptist church in Alberta, one Sunday morning, where an acquaintance of mine was preaching. Unfortunately, as the above quote shows, Hawking never accepted the hope that Christianity offers, through faith in Christ.

In contrast to Hawking, Billy Graham said this about life, death, and the afterlife,

“I have a tremendous amount of hope, because I’m a believer in Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead. And I believe he’s alive right now ... I have tremendous hope in the fact that I’ll be in the future life, and I’ll be there based on what Jesus Christ did for me on the cross and by the resurrection. This gives me a great deal of hope” ([Impactus](#)).

Graham knew that “[the greatest psychological, spiritual, and medical need that all people have is the need for hope.](#)” By preaching salvation by grace and eternal life, to all who accepted Christ, Graham offered to people – hundreds of millions – a great hope that would take them beyond this life on Earth, into an eternity spent with God. As he once said, “[Faith points us beyond our problems to the hope we have in Christ.](#)” (His classic sermon on hope is [here](#).)