

Once in a Lifetime

Someone once wryly observed that even a broken clock shows the correct time twice a day. But there is more to this catchphrase than implying that even the unskilled or uninformed can occasionally be right by chance alone. Before the digital age, clock springs had to be wound, or weights repositioned by hand so that gravity would keep the movement tensioned. A stopped clock meant that either the mechanism was broken or no one was taking care to ensure the clock was working correctly.

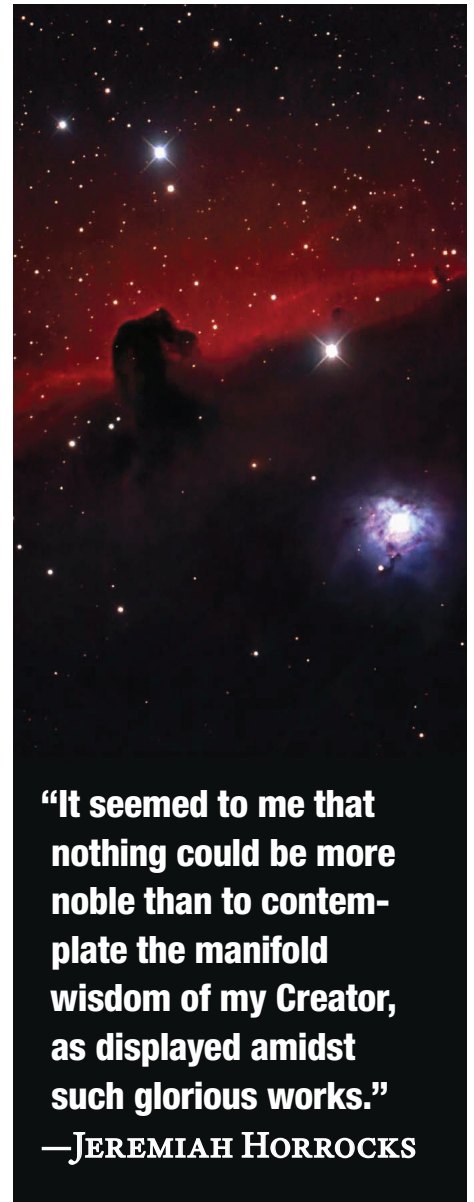
Some years ago, an older man in my local church died. In the aftermath of the funeral, almost no one noticed that the clock at the back of the meeting room had stopped. The few who did, didn't appreciate what the clock was trying to tell them. One person soon pointed out to the many that, for years, the man who had just passed away had quietly and faithfully cared for the clock on the wall, ensuring it always displayed the correct time for the benefit of any who cared to consult it.

And so it was for those in the past who gazed up at the heavens. Many looked but did not see or understand. A few, of the type that we now call astronomers, also looked, and wondered how it all worked and what it was that the heavens were trying to tell them. Building on lifetimes of careful measurement of the time and movements of the divine celes-

tial clock, the few began to understand the size and grandeur of our solar system and the care and clockwork-like precision with which it was constructed.

So how does one check the celestial clock to make sure everything is running on time? The planets and moons of our solar system move through time and frictionless space to obey invisible laws with mathematical precision. Matching their actual appearance and alignment with the charts of predicted celestial events gives a visible and measurable assurance that the Creator—the great Clockmaker—is really there and has taken care to build our solar system and our universe with marvelous precision.

Alignments of the sun, moon, and earth create solar and lunar eclipses fairly frequently. By contrast, other celestial alignments occur so rarely that they are literally once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to check the clock. The “transit” or crossing of the face of the sun by Venus is one of the rarest, but most useful, of predictable celestial events. Occurring in pairs of transits eight years apart, separated by either 105 years or 121 years, it was first observed by the Englishman Jeremiah Horrocks in 1639. The most recent transit was in 2004; and, at this writing, the 2012 transit, the last in our lifetime and the sixth since 1639, is only a few weeks away on June 5-6, 2012. Today, even the average person who cares to look could view



“It seemed to me that nothing could be more noble than to contemplate the manifold wisdom of my Creator, as displayed amidst such glorious works.”
—JEREMIAH HORROCKS

at least a portion of the upcoming transit using various methods (1-3) and see for himself the Clockmaker's hand of care for His creation. —Michael Windheuser

Endnotes

- 1 www.transitofvenus.org
- 2 www.astrosociety.org/uitc; The Universe in the Classroom No. 78, Fall 2011
- 3 William Sheehan and John Westfall, The Transits of Venus (New York, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004).