

Promo for Mars

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue



Future accounts of a manned space mission to Mars may refer to *The Martian* as the beginning step toward funding and launching such a mission. Sure, George W. Bush may have championed space exploration (though the sticker shock in Recession America caused us all to blanch), and Sputnik may have scared Americans into supporting Kennedy's space program. But it took Matt Damon to launch us to Mars.

Much of what is fascinating about *The Martian* is not what happens in the film but the conversations that happen outside it. NASA was, to say the least, enthusiastic in its support. The Johnson Space Center depicted in the film is not the one you can visit in Houston; it's a futuristic one with all the computer gadgetry that the space agency hopes to have. In perfect coordination with Hollywood, NASA announced the day before the film's release that it has conclusive evidence of liquid water on the surface of Mars. *The Martian* is a really, really good commercial for a future budgetary request.

By promoting the value of space exploration, the film also promotes the value of science. The book by Andy Weir on which the film is based is often described as little more than a series of scientific talking points. How will astronaut Mark Watney grow food? How will he light a fire in a setting scientifically engineered to be fireproof? How will he get enough water to grow crops? How will he make a rover designed to go no more than 35 kilometers travel more than 3,000 miles? In the film each problem becomes interesting, and each is solved with a combination of knowledge, ingenuity, and organic processes. Watney (Damon) swears at one point, "I'm going

to science the hell out of this thing,” and you want to cheer.

The film’s final scene has Watney lecturing a group of eager would-be astronauts on how they’ll have to hustle when everything goes sideways. When he asks if they have any questions, every hand shoots up just before the credits roll. The goal is noble: celebrate science in an America where science education has not been funded or lionized, and where it’s been attacked by fundamentalists. We’ll need more of this if we’re going to go to Mars or save our once-hospitable planet. I salute the propaganda. But we should note that a sermon is being preached, and an altar call is expected.

What, then, about religion? There’s not a lot for God to do in movies that lift up science as the solution to all problems. But even in *The Martian*, after you’ve worked all the science, it turns out you can still pray. There are nervous jokes about prayer in the endless mission control scenes. Watney manages to make a fire out of another astronaut’s crucifix after apologizing to Jesus, figuring that Jesus of all people can understand a hopeless predicament.

Writing in *Slate*, Dan Kois notes that Weir’s book is existentially tone deaf, but praises the film for its long sweeping images of desolate Mars, and its use of Damon’s wonderful face to convey genuine angst and an existential quest. In this film, mystery is alive and God is never absent, even when his presence is unsought. Sometimes even Hollywood can see that.