

Pray

Reading

This is the word of God:

17 And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

(Jonah 1:17)

10 And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

(Jonah 2:10)

Intro

We've spent several weeks now in the book of Jonah, but some might say we've yet to address the elephant in the room, or rather the "great fish" in the room.

Can any intellectually credible person really believe that a "great fish" swallowed Jonah, kept him in his belly for three days, and then "vomited Jonah out upon the dry land"?

And of course, the Bible is not short of these kinds of occurrences. A donkey talking. A sea parted so that thousands could walk straight through it. A burning bush that doesn't burn. A whole universe spoken into being. A crucified man being raised from the dead.

You know in Lewis Carrol's Alice in Wonderland, Alice says, "There's no use trying. One can't believe impossible things." To which the Queen replies, "I daresay you haven't had much practise. When I was your age I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

There is a belief in some quarters that this is what Christians are like. They have had so much practise believing impossible things since they were children that it's a waste of time talking to them about science or

rationality. We just believe unreasonable things, and that's that.

The atheist Richard Dawkins has written that “the 19th century is the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment”.

That's why Thomas Jefferson, in 1820, took a razor blade and some glue, and created a version of the New Testament called “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth” in which he stripped out all Jesus' miracles, and any reference to Jesus' deity, while trying to retain the moral teachings of Jesus. Because Jefferson believed it was impossible to believe in his divinity.

But I want to argue that it is not unreasonable to believe in the divinity of Jesus, that it is not unreasonable to believe in miracles.

So three headings:

What is a miracle?

What are miracles *for*?

Are miracles possible?

1. What is a miracle?

The word miracle comes from the Latin *miraculum*, meaning literally “an object of wonder.”

Someone has calculated that there are 163 miracles recorded in the Bible - 83 in the Old Testament and 80 in the New Testament. That might lead you to believe that there are miracles everywhere in the Bible, but actually there are hundreds of years of biblical history where apparently nothing miraculous happens.

Instead what you see are clumps of miracles which congregate around particularly significant biblical events, such as the Exodus or the birth of Christ.

But what kind of event qualifies as a miracle?

As is traditional in my home country, let's start by being negative. What ISN'T a miracle?

We tend to use the word “miracle” in an imprecise. It'll be a miracle if England win the World Cup in my lifetime. Well, it might surprise the bookmakers, but it wouldn't defy the laws of nature. So that wouldn't be a miracle.

We might say, the iPhone is a miracle of miniaturization. It's certainly remarkable, but again, it is consistent with the laws of physics, so it's not a miracle.

“It was a miracle more people weren't hurt by that accident.” It may have been a very unlikely outcome under the circumstances, but that's not a miracle either.

In the Bible, something is a “miracle” when it is a welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and therefore is clearly an act of divine power.

And quite unashamedly, miracles are integral to Christian belief. Every year, Christians celebrate God becoming a man by means of a virgin birth.

And every year, Christians celebrate the physical, bodily resurrection of that man from death.

So why are miracles such a vital part of Christian belief? That takes us to our second heading.

2. What are miracles FOR?

In a nutshell, miracles are intended to prove the existence and presence of God.

Biblically, the first time we see the word “miracle” used is in Exodus where the Lord tells Moses that He has given him the ability to work particular “miracles” in the presence of Pharaoh. He gives Moses the power to do things that would be, humanly speaking, impossible. Now what are these miracles FOR? They’re a sign to Pharaoh that the God of Israel is real and that Pharaoh should repent.

In Psalm 105, David tells his hearers to remember the miracles God has done. He says:

Remember the wondrous works that he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he uttered...
(Psalm 105:5)

Why remember the miracles? Because the miracles prove to them that there is no God like Him and that they should trust Him.

When we get to the New Testament, we see a similar pattern: miracles are intended to be a proof of divine identity. For example, think of Jesus' first miracle, at the wedding in Cana, where he turns water into wine. This was not done as a crowd-pleasing stunt, something to while away the minutes between the hors d'oeuvres and the entree.

Jesus does it to demonstrate his identity, and show that people should put their trust in Him. In fact, one of the main words used for miracles in the New Testament is translated as "sign."

And like any sign, Jesus' miracles point away from themselves. They pointed to the reality that standing right there in front of them is God in the flesh.

People often miss the point of miracles. Imagine we're on a long road trip. And somewhere on the freeway, we see a large green sign that says "Grand Canyon." Immediately, I hit the brakes, pull over, and run toward the sign. "Wow," I shout, "this is amazing. They told me the Grand Canyon was beautiful, but I had no idea!" Then I get my phone, take some selfies with the sign, and drive us home.

Well, this is the way many folks related to Jesus' miracles at the time. They got very excited about the miracles themselves without realizing that each miracle was a signpost pointing to something beyond itself, something infinitely more wonderful: namely, the Messiah Himself.

And of course it can be an easy trap for people to fall into today. We can become so fixated on wanting to see the miraculous signs themselves, that it draws us away FROM Jesus rather than pointing us TO him.

Miracles point to divine identity. John's Gospel is quite explicit about this. In chapter 20, he says:

30 ...Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;
31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.
(John 20:30–31)

So that's what miracles are FOR. They are signposts which point us towards the reality and identity of God. Thirdly...

3. Are miracles possible?

One common argument is that modern science has disproved the possibility of miracles. The idea is that people once believed in miracles because science had not yet developed to the point where it could explain these occurrences in natural terms. There's no longer any need to appeal to a "God of the gaps" to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, because we now know that everything has a natural cause.

For example, scientists have investigated the natural workings of the human reproductive system and have proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that virgins do not get pregnant. And therefore miracles cannot be possible.

But remember our definition of miracles: something is a "miracle" precisely BECAUSE it cannot be explained by natural or scientific laws.

Are miracles naturally or scientifically possible? No. By definition. If they could be explained by natural or scientific means, they would not be miracles.

But if something is not scientifically possible, does that mean it's not possible at all?

Well, perhaps it's helpful to ask ourselves this question: are there things which we all experience as human beings, things which we all recognise as being REAL, which cannot be explained by science?

The philosopher Thomas Nagel makes this point. He's an atheist, but he says that there are plenty of things which fall outside the ability of science to explain. Things like conscious experience, thought itself, morality - these things cannot be reduced to merely physical terms. For example, Nagel says, our moral intuitions about things are REAL. We take them seriously.

When we believe, for example, that cruelty to children is wrong, it doesn't satisfy us to say "well we believe that cruelty to children is wrong because of certain chemicals bouncing around in our brains".

Moral belief has real weight that cannot be reduced to mere chemistry or physics. There are things about reality which physical science cannot do justice to. Nagel says, science cannot prove that genocide is wrong, and yet we believe that. So it seems foolish to argue that just because something isn't scientifically explicable, like miracles for example, they therefore cannot exist.

The philosopher Alvin Plantinga has a useful illustration. He says: some scientists argue that

...the very practice of science requires that one reject the idea of (for example) God raising someone from the dead... [But, he says, this] argument is like the drunk who insisted on looking for his lost car keys only under the streetlight on the grounds that the light was better there. In fact, it would go the drunk one better: it would insist that because the keys would be hard to find in the dark, they must be under the light.¹

And you could go one step further and say: if we cannot discover the car keys under the light, then the car keys must not exist.

But of course, plenty of scientists realise that is absurd. They realise that there are some things that science does not speak to. Despite the common misconception, surveys have shown that a majority of scientists consider themselves either moderately or deeply religious - and those numbers have increased in recent decades.²

¹ This section is indebted to Tim Keller, *The Reason For God*, pp 88-99

² Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, 192-97.

William D Phillips, a nobel laureate in physics, was asked why HE believed in God, and he said:

As a physicist, I look at nature from a particular perspective. I see an orderly, beautiful universe in which nearly all physical phenomena can be understood from a few simple mathematical equations. I see a universe that, had it been constructed slightly differently, would never have given birth to stars and planets, let alone bacteria and people. And there is no good scientific reason for why the universe should not have been different. Many good scientists have concluded from these observations that an intelligent God must have chosen to create the universe with such beautiful, simple, and life-giving properties. Many other equally good scientists are nevertheless atheists. Both conclusions are positions of faith.

Of course, when we ask the question “Are miracles possible?”, what we’re really asking is this: “Is God possible?”

Because if the existence of God IS possible, then the temporary suspension of natural laws would be entirely consistent with that fact. How else could God demonstrate

His existence to us except by doing something clearly God-like — something that is, humanly and scientifically speaking, impossible?

When people say, “The idea of Jonah living inside this great fish is impossible” the only real answer is to say, “The impossibility is the whole point. How else could Someone with SUPER-natural power demonstrate that power?”

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, wrote:

There is no use going to the [biblical] texts until we have some idea about the possibility or probability of the miraculous. Those who assume that miracles cannot happen are merely wasting time by looking into the texts: we know in advance what results they will find for they have begun by begging the question.

This is why the miracle of Jesus' resurrection is so central to Christian belief. The resurrection IS impossible, scientifically speaking. It is intended to be. It is intended to point towards the fact that rather than being subject to natural laws, Jesus Christ is actually the creator of them.

That He is more than merely Jesus of Nazareth. That by Him, as it says in Colossians chapter 1:

...all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things [including the possibility of scientific study, we might add] were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.
(Colossians 1:16–20)

I'm not sure how Jesus Christ would demonstrate any of that to anyone's satisfaction WITHOUT performing the kinds of miracles Jesus performed.

To be sure that miracles CANNOT possibly exist, you have to be sure beyond a doubt that God cannot possibly exist. In other words, at a certain point, you have to take a leap of faith that miracles cannot possibly exist.

And at this point, I'd like to zoom out and ask this question: isn't the universe itself living proof that miracles DO indeed happen?

How is it that the universe exists at all?

At some point, if we rule out the possibility of God, then we're left with no alternative but to say that the universe just came into being by itself, out of literally nothing. And that flies in the face of the most basic scientific law: that every effect must have a cause.

Let me try and illustrate what I mean. Quite frequently these days, I walk into a room and find books mysteriously strewn across the floor. Tissue boxes have been emptied and the contents have been mysteriously turned into confetti. Brightly colored wooden blocks have apparently been strategically placed in such a way as to make it impossible for me to get up in the night without risking severe bodily injury.

Now, if someone were to ask you, "Why has all this happened in the Cooper household?" what you WOULDN'T say is: "It just happened by itself." You would assume, because of the universal law of cause and effect,

that someone or something is responsible for this state of affairs in the Cooper, and without wanting to point fingers, you might assume that it had something to do with existence of two small people under the age of six.

Every effect MUST have a cause. Nothing “just happens” by itself. So what caused the entire universe to happen, when previously there was nothing at all in existence, not even empty space?

This is why in Romans 1, the Apostle Paul says:

“[God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

(Romans 1:20)

Paul saying, all of creation points to a Creator. If you believe in the theory of the Big Bang, who or what was the Big Banger? Who caused that particular effect?

Psalms 19 foreshadows the Apostle Paul when it says:

1 The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

2 Day to day pours out speech,

and night to night reveals knowledge.
(Psalm 19:1–2)

What is it that the skies are proclaiming? They are proclaiming the fact that things exist. And for things to exist, they must have had a first cause. A maker. To say that these things could have come into being without having a first cause is about as unscientific a statement as its possible to make.

As my friend Glen Scrivener puts it:

Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.
Materialists believe in the virgin birth of the
cosmos. Choose your miracle.

The virgin birth of the entire cosmos is no more scientifically verifiable or plausible than the virgin birth of Jesus - and yet, here we are. We exist.

If we're prepared to believe that the cosmos came into being by itself, we should be honest enough to admit that we ARE in fact believing a miracle.

During an interview, the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell was asked to imagine what he would say if he found himself being confronted with God on the day of

judgment: “Suppose,” said the interviewer, “that there, before your very eyes, beyond a shadow of a doubt, was God. What would you say?” Russell apparently wrinkled his nose and said, “Sir, why did You not give me better evidence?”

Psalm 19 and Romans chapter 1 say that Bertrand Russell DID have unmistakable evidence: the fact that Bertrand Russell existed, that he was inhabiting a body, with the ground beneath him, and the sky above him. These things do not just “come into being,” without any First Cause.

But I want to close by saying that if you DO find miracles hard to believe, that’s ok. Miracles are MEANT to be hard to believe in. Because they fly in the face of the natural order of things, the way things usually are.

In fact, if you find miracles hard to believe, you’re in good company. When the resurrected Christ first appeared to his disciples, how did they respond?

It says in Matthew 28:

17 ...when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.

(Matthew 28:17)

Tim Keller points out:

That is a remarkable admission. Here is the author of an early Christian document telling us that some of the founders of Christianity couldn't believe the miracle of the resurrection, even when they were looking straight at him with their eyes and touching him with their hands. [This paints the early church leaders in such a poor light that] There is no other reason for this to be in the account unless it really happened.

I said earlier that miracles were intended to be a signpost, pointing to the reality that God exists and that Jesus Christ is His Son. But actually, miracles do something more than that, especially the miracles of Jesus.

What miracles do is that they give us a glimpse of the kingdom that Jesus is bringing with Him. When Jesus arrives in Galilee, he says, Mark chapter 1:

15 ...“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand...”
(Mark 1:15)

And then he proceeds to turn water into wine, heal sickness, heal blindness and deafness and those who are unable to speak, heal injuries and those who cannot walk, multiply food where there is none, drive out evil spirits, control the elements, and even overcome death itself.

Each of these miracles is saying to us: THIS is what the kingdom of God is like. An everlasting wedding feast where there will be no more sickness or suffering or genetic disorder, no more evil, no more hunger, no more natural disasters, and no more death.

“We think of miracles as a suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant his miracles to be a restoration of the natural order.”³

Jesus came to heal and redeem everything in our world that is broken, to show us a glimpse of His kingdom, and beckon each of us into it, if we will simply repent and believe in Him.

His miracles are not just PROOF of his power: they show us what he intends to do with it.

³ Keller, *Reason For God*, 99

Let's pray.