



## Miracles

The picture is from a recent National Geographic article about how finely tuned the universe is for human life. A slightly different position in the universe, a slightly different composition of gases, and life as we know it could not exist. Someone calculated the odds as being the same as the probability of throwing a dart from hundreds of kilometres out in space and hitting a target a fraction of a millimetre in diameter on the turning earth. This is a source of wonder.

1) First point, the word miracles comes from the Latin word “mira” to wonder at. And woven throughout the entire bible is the idea that EVERYTHING in creation is wonderful, and we should constantly live in an attitude of wonder at what we see around us. Romans 1: 20 says: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” Jesus encouraged us all to be like children, and a distinguishing characteristic of unspoiled children is a sense of wonder at the world. Beth has just sent a clip of children in Africa, wildly excited at a tray of seeds sprouting.



When we speak of miracles we usually mean extra-ordinary happenings, but we should all live with a sense of wonder at “ordinary miracles,” all the time. “Whoa! You’re amazing, God!”

2) Second, as I have been preparing for this sermon, I’ve been conscious of how often even those who call themselves unbelievers pray for miracles, and one of the greatest miracles is that we expect the creator of the Universe to intervene on the level of individuals and their specific needs. The audacity of

this is marvellous. Implicit, is a belief that God knows each one of us, cares about what happens to us, and has the power and the authority to tweak the purely mechanistic unfolding of history to bring about specific outcomes for individuals. This is all bound up with faith. Faith is the expectation that the creator hears us and the miracles we pray for will happen. Jesus says in Matthew [17:20]: “if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

3) Third, I don't believe it is a good way to live to spend our lives “shopping around” for the sensational and spectacular. If we are always seeking something ever more amazing, this could compromise our availability to do all the ordinary things that God asks us to do as his hands and feet here on earth.

Also, what is spectacular is not always good and holy. The bible says there are spectacular black arts out there that have been permitted certain power, and we don't want to confuse their work for God's work. Back in Exodus [e.g. 7:11, 22; 8:7] Moses does some impressive feats, but Pharaoh's magicians do “the same things by their secret arts”.

And in Matt 7 [22-23], Jesus says: Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not ... in your name perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”

Matthew 24 [24] says: “For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive ...”

And Matthew 16 [4] says “A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign ...”

So I believe we need to be discerning, and while certainly we should pray for miracles and have faith that God can and sometimes does grant these, we should not become overly focused on the spectacular.

4) Fourth, we need to say “please.” “Please” is a short form of “if you please”. In other words, “only if it pleases you,” or, “your will be done, Lord.” God is sovereign, and while he sometimes says yes, he must reserve the right to say “No,” or sometimes, “Wait.”

I'll tell you two true stories from my own life – first, about a time when God said “Yes” to a miracle:

*Imagine a huge shooting lodge in Cumbria, United Kingdom, with umpteen bedrooms. The year is 1978, and I am aged 20 and have worked a passage over to Europe on a Quixotic quest to prove or disprove the existence of God. And a friend of mine, Stu, has lost a contact lens, and thinks he last remembers wearing it in the stone-flagged gun-room...*

*After searching in vain, I told him I was trying to prove whether God was real and still had power in today's world. Would he mind if I tried an experiment, and prayed? He said okay, so I prayed an awkward prayer. We quartered the floor again: nothing. Then he needed to go off clay pigeon shooting, and I was going to take the motorcycle we had bought jointly – Rebecca – and*

head in to Penrith. I needed my passport, and went to the other end of this vast house to collect it. And suddenly, between bed and cupboard, I knew that at a certain point in the carpet was the contact lens, deep in the carpet and invisible to my eye. I simply bent down and picked it out. I have replayed those moments over and over mentally, checking for explanations other than the miraculous, but I am left feeling certain that this was in fact a miracle.

And God seemed to know that others would also try to find rational explanations, because over the ensuing months there were two more miracles involving that lens. A short while later I received a snail-mail letter from Stu (I think I might still even have it filed somewhere, back in Zimbabwe; I certainly had every intention of keeping it), which went something like this: "Hey, do you remember that contact lens? And that experiment you were doing?"

Did I? Rhetorical question!

"Well," he said, "I took Rebecca into Carlisle and rode over a long section of earthworks, and at the far side I realised I couldn't see. So I parked, walked back into the dug-up section and reached down and picked up the contact lens – just like that."

Sometime later, another letter. He had been staying with his cousin, Sarah, in North London. I had visited the flat. It hovered three floors up in Campden Town or thereabouts.

Again, did I remember that contact lens, and the experiment? DID I?

Stu wrote that he had washed his face one morning, then realised he couldn't see a blessed thing. He had walked down the three flights and simply picked the lens out of the drain.

I got the message! God does perform miracles today, not just two thousand years ago.

My second story is about a time God said "No", and my father was not miraculously healed of cancer. And yet, even during the time of his illness, and certainly afterwards, we were left in no doubt that God was working a series of miracles, for example in the way people responded to how my Dad faced that suffering. And I came to see – as we heard in our bible reading from Hebrews ch 11 – that sometimes faith is manifested in victorious miracles, and other times it is worked out in persecution and hardship. That's a tough truth, but it is true. I quote from the message at a funeral during that time, of a pastor we knew: "This is a truth of which the modern church, with its obsession with miracles, needs to take account of. Jennifer Larcombe, holding her wheelchair above her head, and Joni Eareckson Tada, ministering around the world sitting in hers, are equally demonstrating the power of faith."



God sometimes says “yes”, and performs miracles, but he sometimes says “no,” and we need to trust this is for good reason.

5) Fifth, when God does answer with a “yes”, we need to remember to say “thank you”.

In Luke 17 [11-19], Jesus heals ten lepers miraculously, but only one – a Samaritan – comes back to say thank you. And Jesus asks: “Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” Clearly we need to be people who give thanks for past miracles, as well as people who request fresh ones.

6) Sixth, moving onto the harder issue of miracles and science. I think there are two main classes of miracle – those that are statistically improbable but don’t actually break the laws of nature, and those that require the known laws of nature to be broken in special circumstances. And I think the latter – suspending the known laws of nature – can present a particular problem for scientists. Science relies on the unwritten premise that natural laws will always apply, with no exceptions, like the law of gravity and the rules of mathematics. I thought of this the other day when we were playing a game that one of Beth’s friends, Teresa, was perfecting. She had worked in a refugee camp in Rwanda for some years, and this was a refugee camp game. Players scored AID funding, traded staple foods, aspired to buy or steal commuter buses, and generally tried to survive. Beth had played the game with Teresa, and reported that it had gone quite smoothly, but now Teresa wanted other people to play it and see if any tweaks were necessary when she was not around to make running repairs and adjustments. And sure enough, as we played, there were a few times when there were hiccups and we had to make up our own rules in order for the game to go on. Which was fine – the game was only in its pilot phase, and these hiccups were exactly what Teresa wanted to know about. She wanted a robust set of rules that covered all contingencies. It’s the same when we write computer programs – if users can crash our programs then we haven’t been paying attention.

And I think that if we have a scientific bone in our bodies, we feel that if God has to keep intervening in his world, then life is not a very good game, and perhaps it should have been subjected to a more rigorous piloting phase. We also DELIGHT in some of those laws – circle geometry is a miracle in itself – I was trying to convey this to students the other day – just how astonishing circle geometry is. So we live with this tension – we want a loving God to make exceptions in deserving cases, but we also like to know where we stand and that laws such as gravity and magnetism will continue to operate.

So an important question is, “when God does miracles, does he in fact break his own rules?”

And I don’t pretend to have all the answers here, but I think that sometimes (I hesitate to say always, but that’s certainly a possibility), sometimes miracles may not break rules, they may adhere to rules we

are as yet unaware of. This world is HUGELY, WONDERFULLY complex. The moment we think that we have the atom nailed down as the smallest indivisible particle, our microscopes become more powerful and we find that atoms consist of even smaller particles subject to immensely powerful and complex forces. When things don't quite fit, scientists start asking why, and peeling back onion-skins of knowledge to find if there is a more universal law at work. An example is Isaac Newton's theory of gravitation. His "law" made sense of a great many things that had puzzled scientists of the day, but as time went on, slight inconsistencies became apparent, and we had to wait for Einstein to explain these with his more universal theory of relativity. Only, that theory also doesn't quite work, and scientists are digging still deeper. This universe is seriously complex. And scientific knowledge is only ever provisional. "Miracles" of one era may be sticking to yet-to-be-discovered rules of the next era. When I was writing this, I was reminded of the white witch in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* [Ch. 15]. The witch thinks Aslan should be morally bound by the generally accepted laws, and yet, what she didn't know was that if she "had looked back before the dawn of time, she would have learned that when a willing, innocent victim is killed by a traitor, the Stone Table will crack and death will be reversed."

Aslan did not break the rules, he merely invoked a deeper, older rule. And I think the history of science shows that we have sometimes thought that natural laws have been broken in special cases when instead there has been an even deeper law at work. We are learning more "rules" about our created world all the time.

One corollary is that if we always rush in and label all that we don't humanly understand as "a miracle," this can come back to bite us in the heel if a scientific explanation is found. We have a name for this – "God of the gaps." That means attributing everything we don't understand to God's divine intervention. In one sense, yes, God created everything and made the rules, but IF what we term "miracles" are not in fact exceptions to natural laws, then we need to attribute these correctly as straightforward applications of deeper laws in a marvellous system. God is a God of truth, and I believe he likes us to get our facts straight. Crying "miracle" where there is a scientific explanation can have the effect (a) of making God seem progressively less relevant, and (b) of exalting science to a position it does not deserve.

I want to give an example of what I see as a really good way for scientists to speak about apparently miraculous phenomena. It is from a scientific paper by Emeritus professor Bob Gill and others. For years these authors have been researching our kūaka, the bar-tailed Godwit, which flies 11000km non-stop from Alaska to spend its summer here in New Zealand. In a recent scientific paper, Gill and his co-authors wrote: *"Birds selected departure dates when atmospheric conditions conferred the greatest wind assistance both at departure and throughout their flights. This behaviour suggests that there exists*

*a cognitive mechanism, heretofore unknown among migratory birds, that allows godwits to assess changes in weather conditions that are linked (i.e. teleconnected) across widely separated atmospheric regions.”*

Between the lines, this is saying we are looking at a miracle here. Godwits optimise their flight plans to factor in atmospheric conditions that will occur thousands of kilometres away, and days later. Maybe some of those co-authors believe in an omnipotent creator, I don't know, but theirs is a helpful model for how we should phrase things in a way that does not overstate but also does not diminish. They say: “We have observed a truly remarkable phenomenon, here; we don't understand it yet, but here's what happens.” Expressed like this, we can still “mira” – wonder at – this further proof of the complexity of our world, and this wonder will not be undermined if scientists identify a new kind of data transmission used by godwits. Or whatever. There is no conflict here, between science and our Christian faith – however God achieved this result, we are witnessing something extraordinary. But we serve a God of truth, and we do not serve him well if we attribute his wonders carelessly or incorrectly.

7) Seventh, so what about the more spectacular biblical miracles? Can some of these now be explained by science? In both the old and NT we are spoilt for choice of miracles. I could have singled out walking on water, numerous instances of healing, the plagues of Egypt, and a wealth of anecdotes about Elijah and Elisha. But let us look at the day in Joshua [10: 12-14] when the sun and moon stood still so that Joshua could have more time to conclude his fight against the Amorites. Wow! And it gets better. In 2 Kings [20: 8-11], when Hezekiah asks for a sign that the Lord will heal him, a shadow goes down the steps and then back up ten steps! Like, WOW!

I see these miracles as among those potentially most problematic for scientists – we're not talking here about unusual concentrations of locusts descending on Egypt at a particularly opportune time for the Israelites – that's an abnormal scale of events, and serendipitous timing, but nothing that breaks the rules. 2 Kings, in contrast, suggests that the laws of planetary motion are suspended. Which would be a very big deal. In the Otago Daily Times a few weeks ago [Friday April 13<sup>th</sup>], in the “Ask a Scientist” column, someone asked “What would happen if the earth either stopped rotating or slowed down drastically. Would the oceans fly off into space?”

And an astronomer at the Univ. of Canterbury wrote that, no, oceans would not fly off since you'd still have gravity, but there would nevertheless be chaos. I quote:

*“At the equator, everything is moving eastwards at more than 1600kmh. .... If the spinning suddenly stopped, then anything loose or fluid would continue moving, just as a sudden stop in a vehicle makes everything lurch forward....”*

So could the writer be speaking figuratively and non-literally in those passages? Or did these things appear to happen, but were merely an illusion good enough to convince the writer? Or, did the earth and the moon quite literally stop dead?

I don't know. I believe God can do anything – he is the creator, right? – but my human prejudices give me a sneaking sympathy with the white witch when she said it would not be *fair* to make a bunch of natural laws and then keep on breaking them, at whim.

Or could there be another explanation? What about a huge comet surrounded by gas that refracted the sun's light, allowing the earth to keep on going while the sun appeared to stay in the same place for a day, with no physical laws being broken?



Or, could there be some property of time about which we have yet to learn? Or even some reflecting surface out there in the cosmos? To me those kinds of explanation would sit better with a God who has given us so much delight in his consistent laws. A God who created Teresa, punctiliously fine-tuning her refugee camp game so no-one has to invent any new rules. But at present we cannot be certain. We see an astonishing miracle. And I think probably it is best to echo Bob Gill and say, “there is some mechanism, heretofore unknown at work here,” and to treat these events as intriguing puzzles set up for our enjoyment and delight.

And get this – whatever happened, and however God did it, the timing in Joshua and Kings was utterly extraordinary – these events unfolded at the precise moment they needed to happen. Which is incredibly reassuring, because it suggests that God has a plan with split-second timing, and everything is going according to schedule. He is the Lord of time and space.

8) So a few final points and another pair of stories – how should we then live, and how should we pray?

- We should constantly live in wonder.
- We should not be sensation seekers, always searching for ever more spectacular miracles.
- We should say “if you please”, and accept that God sometimes says “no,” for good reason.
- We should say “thank you” at least as often as we say “please.”
- We should be specific, NOT so as to demand our rights, but in order to recognise miracles when they are granted. I'll tell you a story about another miracle in our life: *We had rented for about ten years, and finally we did a car deal that was enough to buy a plot of land. We prayed to be shown the right plot, and because Di had read a book that encouraged us to be specific in our*

*prayers, I prayed for land with a tennis court and borehole. We put notices in the pew leaflets of a few churches, and shortly thereafter a woman phoned us saying she was selling a rather unusual property – it was empty other than for two things – a tennis court, and a borehole!*

Needless to say, we bought it and built a house there. What Di and I learned was that it's okay to dream, and to clarify what exactly we are asking God for, so that we can recognise miracles when they are granted, and give him thanks. This is very different from a motive of being specific because we will settle for nothing less, or because we are demanding our rights.

And by the way, a postscript: years later we thought about buying a different house, in Bulawayo – we arrived at a game plan that we believed would get me out of academia and with more time to write (I'm still praying for this, by the way, just in case anyone wants to join me in praying for a miracle here, though I'm leaving it quite late to make my move). Back then, we thought that our plan had everything going for it, and yet we felt God was saying "no". We said, "you can't be serious, Lord," but in the end we accepted that the answer was no, and sometime later the economy of the country collapsed, and in retrospect, our plan would have been a disaster.

- We need to take care over words when we pray. I sometimes do a mental replay of what I have just said and it sounds something like: "please God be with me and my kids and Auntie Jane and the cat and dog and budgie." We would not like our children asking like that, would we? Ecclesiastes says "the teacher searched to find just the right words." We need to remember that we are talking to the Lord of the Universe.
- Best of all is to try and discern what is God's will, and then pray in his will. 1 John 5:14b says: "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." In other words, the best way for God to grant a miracle is probably not to make a snap judgement about what we desire or think would fix the problem and fire off a hasty prayer asking God to action this! Our first step should be to pray for wisdom as to what God's will is, and then to "ask according to his will." If God granted our every whim, beginning from when we were immature Christians, we would probably live in chaos. I have looked back and been profoundly thankful that God said "no" to some of my prayers.
- Accept sooner rather than later that a miracle is needed, because otherwise we tend to keep trying to solve problems in our own strength.
- Finally, God DOES do miracles. *Today*. NOW. We can't be sure exactly how, but he does. We need to start praying for miracles, specifically, and – if we are in his will – expecting results.