

How can miracles be true?

Series: The Case for Faith

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This morning we continue our series called The Case for Faith. It's a series that tackles the eight toughest questions aimed at the Christian faith. It's based on the recent book by the same name written by ex-atheist, now strong Christian, Lee Strobel. Last week the question we wrestled with was, "If God is so good, why is the world so bad?" More bad things happened this week, right? But God is still good, right?

As part of that teaching we listened to an interview that Strobel did with Charles Templeton. Charles Templeton at one time was a strong Christian himself. In fact, he was the pastor of a large church in Canada and an associate of Billy Graham who traveled the world sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. But today, Charles Templeton is an agnostic. He doesn't believe in God anymore. In fact, he wrote a book called Farewell to God.

And in another slice of his interview with Strobel, this is what he said, "As I began to think about the world as the creation of God. And I began to think about the plagues that sweep across parts of the world and indiscriminately kill more often than not painfully, ordinary, decent and rotten people, and it just became crystal clear to me that it is not possible for an intelligent person to believe that there's a deity who loves."

Last week, we answered that question by saying, "Yes it is possible for intelligent people to believe in a God like that who allows suffering." Because suffering is a result of living in a sinful world. We live in a sin-cursed world where bad things like plagues and earthquakes and famines happen. And it's horrible. But a good God can bring good out of evil, like he did with the cross. The worst event that ever happened in human history became the best event that ever happened, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

This is not the perfect world that God created, it's a world that's been marred by sin. And sin came into this world because God created a good thing called freedom. We all have free choice.

And free choice gives us the ability to love, which is the highest value in the universe. But it also gives the ability to hate, which is the lowest value in the universe and the cause of much of the suffering in this world.

We talked about how God is not immune to suffering. God feels our pain. He's not some Buddha figure who sits silent, cross-legged and detached from his creation. No, he's a God who got down and dirty and experienced every single pain we could possibly experience. And when we hurt, he hurts with us. And one day he will destroy evil and pain and suffering when Jesus Christ returns and God creates a new heaven and a new earth where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away, the new has come.

That's an intelligent response to the problem of pain that affects every single one of us. Now today we want to talk about miracles. So much of our Christian faith is based on the miraculous? But are miracles true? Doesn't science explain everything?

C. S. Lewis the brilliant atheist who also became a Christian wrote a book called Miracles . And in it he said, "All the essentials of Hinduism would, I think, remain unimpaired if you subtracted the miraculous, and the same is almost true of Islam. But you cannot do that with Christianity. It is precisely the story of a great Miracle. A naturalistic Christianity leaves out all that is specifically Christian."

In other words, you can't have the Christian faith without miracles. Jesus ministry was authenticated by miracles. His life was punctuated by the greatest miracle, his resurrection. Miracles affirmed that he was the Son of God. Like the miracle that Jesus did for Peter and his disciples recorded in Luke 5 when he gave them an incredible catch of fish.

Catching a ton of fish, in the middle of the day, on the Sea of Galilee, when he hadn't got a bite all night, was a miracle and Peter knew it. And he also knew at that moment that he was the presence of someone very special. Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man.

Miracles are at the heart of the Christian faith. But that was then and this is now. That was before science. That was before Max Planck, the great German physicist, said in 1937, "Faith in miracles must yield ground, step by step, before the steady and firm advance of the forces of science, and its total defeat is indubitably a mere matter of time." Miracles are outdated, right?

Not every scientist feels that way. Nuclear physicist Hugh Siefken said, "My faith can be summed up in this one paradox: I believe in science, and I believe in God. And I plan to continue testifying to both."

Is it possible to believe both in science and in a God who does miracles? Absolutely, because miracles don't contradict science. Miracles lie outside of science and there's a difference.

In his book *Christianity and the Nature of Science*, philosopher J. P. Moreland uses the law of gravity to illustrate that difference. The law of gravity says if you drop an object it will fall to the ground. But if an apple falls from a tree and you catch it before it hits the ground, have you contradicted the law of gravity? No, you've simply intervened in the law of gravity in a natural way. The law of gravity still exists. And that's what God does when he supernaturally intervenes in our world by doing things like parting the Red Sea, or bringing fish to a boat, or healing an illness, or raising Jesus from the dead. He intervenes in the laws that he himself established.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ doesn't contradict the scientific fact that people generally stay in their graves after they die. That's an observable, repeatable fact that's happened billions of times. And as Christians we believe that to be true. But we also believe that this one man, named Jesus of Nazareth, didn't stay in his grave. He came back to life. God raised Jesus from the dead by intervening in the natural law of death. So we believe both in science and miracles.

Now, before we go any further we need to define what a miracle is. We can all use that term pretty loosely. It's a miracle the Phillies are in first place on Mother's Day! Usually they're only in first place the day before the season starts. But in the technical sense a miracle is an event which is not produced by the natural causes that are operating at the time and place that the event occurs. In other words, there has to be a supernatural explanation for what happened. Nature can't explain it. So I guess it really is a miracle that the Phillies are in first place today!

But when it comes to our Christian faith, a faith predicated on the miraculous, there's really only one miracle we need to believe, because if that one miracle is true, it opens the door for every other miracle to be true as well. We only have to believe in one. What's that one miracle? It's the miracle of Genesis 1:1, In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. If you believe the first verse of the Bible, everything else is believable.

For you see, if we believe that miracle, that there's a God who created everything we see out of nothing, then to believe that God can part the Red Sea, heal the sick, and raise the dead is child's play. If we really believe in a God who created the universe, then for him to create a Y chromosome in Mary's womb to produce a virgin birth would be simple. If there's a Creator who designed and brought the universe into being, who sustains its existence moment by moment, who's responsible for the very

natural laws that govern the world, then it's certainly rational to believe that miracles are possible. So the issue is, do you believe in a supernatural God?

So in the time that remains, let me give you four reasons why I believe it makes sense to believe in a supernatural God. First, because God makes sense out of the universe. Up until about 35 years ago, atheist and agnostic scientists believed that the universe was eternal and uncaused. It didn't have a beginning. So we didn't need a God to explain where it came from. It's always been there, they thought.

But in 1965, with the discovery of background radiation, that all changed. Scientists discovered a beginning. And the Big Bang theory was hatched as an explanation for the origin of the universe. You won't find many respected scientists today who believe that the universe is eternal. Instead, they now believe it started at some point with a bang. But they don't know who made that bang.

Kai Nielsen, a prominent atheistic philosopher, scratches his head when he says, "Suppose you suddenly hear a loud bang in the middle of the night and you ask me, 'What made that bang?' and I say, 'Nothing, it just happened.' You wouldn't accept that as an answer, because if there has to be a cause for a little bang, then there has to be a cause for a big bang."

And a being like the God of the Bible explains that bang, because he is that cause. But then who caused God, right? Nobody. God doesn't need a cause because God's always been there. Only things that begin to exist need a cause. And God never began to exist, he's eternal, the uncaused cause.

Even the famous skeptic David Hume admitted, "I have never asserted so absurd a proposition as to say that anything might arise without a cause." God makes sense out of the origin of the universe.

God makes sense out of the complexity of the universe. Life is delicately balanced on a razor's edge. If the earth's atmosphere were tweaked just a little bit in depth or density we would either fry or freeze to death. If the earth didn't rotate on its axis, but like the moon presented the same side to the sun all the time, the earth would be as desert. If the earth rotated just a little bit slower on its axis, it would be pulled closer and closer to the sun until all life would burn up. If the earth rotated a little faster, it would spin further and further away from the sun until we would freeze like ice. That's the complexity of our universe.

Let alone the complexity of our bodies. Each one of us has about 30 trillion cells in our body. Each cell has 46 chromosomes. The activity in a single cell is equivalent to that of a city the size of Chicago. The genetic information contained in each cell is equal to a library of 4,000 volumes. Multiply that by 30

trillion cells and you can start to appreciate the complexity of a single person. Tell me what takes more faith, to believe in chance or in God? The chances of all these kinds of things just happening is like believing that there was an explosion in a print shop, a big bang, that produced Webster's dictionary.

Patrick Glynn, a Harvard grad and atheist turned Christian, said in his book *God: The Evidence*, "The picture of the universe given to us by the most advanced twentieth-century science is closer in spirit to the vision presented in the Book of Genesis than anything offered by science since the days of Copernicus." The more we discover, the more we find reasons to believe in God. God makes sense out of the universe.

Second, God makes sense out of moral values. Put simply, if God doesn't exist then there are no objective moral values in the universe. There is no standard of right and wrong. We become the standard. But objective moral values exist and they are binding whether we believe in them or not.

For example, to say that the Holocaust was wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis thought it was right. And it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and exterminated every single person who didn't agree with them. It would be wrong because an atrocity like that violates an objective moral value, murder, established by God.

If there's no God, then morality is a matter of personal preference. Things like stealing, rape, child abuse, the killing of innocent children may be wrong for you, but not necessarily for me. If there's no God who's set universal standards then these things aren't morally wrong, they're just socially unacceptable.

But the truth is, moral values do exist. We all know that deep down in our souls. And that's a strong argument for God's existence. We all have a conscience. It comes factory installed in every human being. As somebody said, "Conscience is that still small voice that tells you what other people should do." God makes sense out of moral values.

Third, God makes sense out of the resurrection. Again, the simple point I'm making is that if we have good reason to believe in God, we have good reason to believe in miracles. And without a doubt the most spectacular miracle ever witnessed in human history is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

There are four facts that widely accepted by believers and non-believers alike about the fate of Jesus Christ. The first is that after Jesus was crucified he was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. That

information is documented and dated within five years after Jesus' death. That's not long enough for a legend to develop.

Second, on the Sunday after the crucifixion, the tomb was empty. Even those who don't believe in the resurrection admit that the tomb was empty. The Jewish authorities, who at the time were trying to silence Jesus, knew that the tomb was empty.

Third, on multiple occasions, in a variety of settings, to a broad spectrum of people, individuals and groups alike, Jesus appeared after his resurrection. Once to a crowd of over 500 people.

And fourth, there's no other explanation for the dramatic change in the lives of the disciples. The same men, who denied Jesus and ran away from him at his arrest, after the resurrection came to believe so strongly in him that they were all willing to put their lives on the line and most of them died for their faith.

There's no natural explanation for those four facts. The best explanation is a supernatural one and that's that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is the great miracle, C. S. Lewis said. That's the cornerstone of the Christian faith. God makes sense out of the resurrection.

Fourth, God makes sense out of my experience. Those of us who know Jesus Christ as our personal Savior have the greatest witness to the reality of God living inside us, the Holy Spirit. We know it's true because the Holy Spirit whispers to our spirit that we belong to God. That's what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:16. And we've seen God answer prayer. We've seen God change our lives and the lives of others. We've seen God act in so many different ways. That's our primary evidence for God.

I love the story about the man who had been an alcoholic for years until Christ changed his life. One of his friends asked him, "Now that you're a Christian, do you believe the miracles in the Bible?" And the man, "Yes, I do." His friend said, "Do you really believe that story about Jesus changing water into wine?" He said, "I sure do." The other guy said, "How can you believe such nonsense?" The man said, "Because in my house Jesus changed whiskey into furniture. The money I was wasting on the bottle, I now use for my family. He turned whiskey into furniture." And those of us who know Jesus Christ, know the ways he's taken the whiskey in our lives and turned it into furniture. God's changed us.

Peter Grant, a pastor in Atlanta puts it this way. Let's say you're going to the office to see if your boss is in. You see his car in the parking lot. You ask the secretary if he's in, and she says, "Yes, I just spoke with him." You see light from under his office door. You listen and hear his voice on the telephone. You haven't seen your boss, but based on all that evidence, you believe your boss is in. But if you knock on

his door and meet him fact-to-face then evidence of the car in the parking lot, the secretary's testimony, the light under the door, the voice on the telephone would still all be valid, but it would not be your primary evidence, because now you've met the boss face-to-face.

And in the same way, when we've met God face-to-face, all the arguments and the evidence for his existence, though still valid, takes second place in our lives. It only confirms what we know by experience. And knowing God personally and seeing him change lives are the greatest miracles of all. Do you know him? Miracles are true, but do you know the miracle maker?