

This short book packs a punch! Tim Chester tackles our questions about miracles honestly and biblically, challenges our assumptions, and leads us to a God who is even bigger than we imagined.

**Elizabeth McQuoid,
Writer and Commissioning Editor, Keswick Ministries**

In an area of great confusion, Tim Chester provides compelling arguments and clear guidance. Thoughtful, careful and caring, this little book will be immensely helpful to all who read it.

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Tim Chester has written a profoundly helpful book on miracles. As a pastor I am frequently asked if we should pray for miracles, why we don't see more of them, and what to do when God doesn't grant a miracle. This book answers all of these questions—but it does more. Its compelling focus on Jesus orders miracles beneath the Miracle-worker himself in a way I've not seen before. Refreshing, insightful, thought-provoking and hand-out worthy!

**Jonathan Dodson,
Lead pastor, City Life Church, Austin, Texas**



Do miracles happen today?

And other questions about signs,
wonders and mighty works



Tim Chester

the goodbook
COMPANY



Do miracles happen today?
*And other questions about signs, wonders
and mighty works*
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*“Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by
God to you by miracles, wonders and signs”*

Acts 2 v 22

Can my friend be healed?



As we sat together in the staff canteen, she told me that her best friend was dying of cancer. She was full of a sense of the loss that was coming, unsure of how she would cope.

But Christians in her church had told her that her friend would be healed if only she had faith. At first that had sounded like good news. Here was hope. She had prayed. Both of them had prayed. The whole church had prayed. And on some days, the good days, it looked as if maybe God had heard those prayers—as if things were on the up. Perhaps the cancer was in retreat. Perhaps the tumour was shrinking. But the bad days were overtaking the good days. It was becoming clear that her friend's condition was getting worse. Was it her fault? Was her friend paying the price of her faltering faith? Or did God not care?

“What do you think?” she asked me. “Do miracles happen today? Can my friend be healed?”

Did miracles happen then?



Lots of weird stuff happens in the Bible. People walk on water. People touch handkerchiefs and are healed. People disappear into the sky. (Matthew 14 v 22-33; Acts 19 v 11-12; 2 Kings 2 v 11-12; Acts 1 v 9) These events stretch credibility. And at different points people have asked me, “How can you believe in such far-fetched stories?” and “How can you take the miracles of the Bible seriously in the light of modern science?”

Our lack of experience doesn't rule out miracles

The 18th-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, says this about miracles:

Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature ... There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a

*direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.*¹

What Hume is saying is this: by definition, a miracle is an event outside normal human experience—otherwise it's not a miracle. But if it's outside our experience, then we must doubt its existence because we've never seen it.

It is said the King of Siam refused to believe stories of rivers that became so hard that elephants could walk across them. Nothing in his experience prepared him for such a possibility. You can sympathise with his incredulity. But the fact that he had never encountered ice does not mean ice does not exist, nor that rivers never freeze over.²

The experience of our generation can't be the criterion for what can happen. Just because you've never seen a miracle doesn't mean a miracle can't happen. Elsewhere, Hume himself says we can't prove that "the future must be conformable to the past".³

The laws of nature don't rule out miracles

Hume has another argument against miracles: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the

1 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (1894), Section 10, Part 1, p 114-5.

2 Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Paternoster, 1984), p 84.

3 David Hume, *An Abstract of A Treatise on Human Nature* (1740), ed. John Maynard Keynes and Piero Sraffa (1938), p 15.

fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined". In other words, miracles violate the laws of nature and we know that can't happen.

C.S. Lewis, the Oxford professor who wrote the Narnia Chronicles, once gave this illustration. Suppose I put £2 in a drawer. Then a week later I add another £2 and the following week a further £2. Suppose I then open my drawer and discover only £1. What has happened? Have the laws of arithmetic been broken or the laws of England?

His point was twofold. First, the laws of nature are not like the laws of England. We're using the word "law" in a different sense. The laws of nature are not statutes that must be obeyed, but patterns we observe in the world around us. "There are not such laws [of nature]," says the Scottish author Donald Macleod. "There are only customs of God, describing the way that he normally preserves and governs the world of created reality, in all its fullness and variety."⁴ The English theologian John Stott is not as hostile to the terminology, but makes the same point: "Natural law is not an alternative to divine action, but a useful way of referring to it. So-called 'natural' laws simply describe the uniformity which scientists have observed."⁵

Our formulae and principles *describe* the patterns we see. But scientists are not police enforcing the laws of nature. They're people who are gradually discerning

4 Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Christian Focus, 1995), p 80.

5 John Stott, "*But I Say to You*": *Christ the Controversialist* (IVP UK, 2013), p 54.

and discovering the patterns of the world. The very language of “laws” of nature comes from Christian scientists who assumed that the patterns they observed in the world around them had been placed there by a divine law-giver. If there is a God who intervenes in our world, he’s not bound by the laws of nature as if they’re some decree.

Second, what has happened when C.S. Lewis only finds £1 in the drawer? Almost certainly there has been “an intervention”. Someone has opened the drawer and stolen some money. Has the thief violated the laws of arithmetic? No. It’s not that they’ve made $2 + 2 + 2 = 1$. Instead, they’ve simply stolen £5. They’ve changed the calculation so that it has become $2 + 2 + 2 - 5 = 1$. In the same way, if there is a God and if he intervenes from outside our universe, he’s not “violating” the laws of nature. He’s simply changing the context in which they operate. If there is a Creator, then there’s no law which says he can’t intervene in his world to perform miracles. “It would be ridiculous to suppose,” says John Stott, “that the creation now controls the Creator. He is able to step aside from his uniformity, and the Bible says that he has sometimes done so.”⁶

Test case: the resurrection

So there’s no reason to suppose miracles *can’t* happen. But, of course, that doesn’t mean they do. It certainly doesn’t mean every miraculous claim is true. It’s right

6 John Stott, “*But I Say to You*”: *Christ the Controversialist* (IVP UK, 2013), p 56.

to be sceptical. Something can be possible in theory without being true in practice. It might be theoretically possible that there's life on Mars. But, as far as we know, that doesn't mean there is. So let's consider another question: *do miracles happen?*

The resurrection of Jesus is the key miracle for Christian faith. Christianity stands or falls by this miracle. If God can bring life where there is no life, then nothing is impossible for him. Walking on water is still weird, but it is possible for a God who can raise the dead. The Bible itself says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15 v 17). You can take other miracles out of the Bible and the Christian faith would still be coherent. But if you disprove this miracle, then the whole thing comes crashing down. Again, let me quote David Hume: "The Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one".

Here's the apostle John's account of the resurrection from John 20:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with

that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20 v 19-31

What is the explanation for the empty tomb?

Let's start with the idea that this was a myth that evolved to express spiritual truths. Perhaps it was a story that captured the idea that there is always hope. In England we tell the story of King Arthur pulling the sword *Excalibur* from the stone. It's a story that shapes English identity, but no one believes it actually happened. Are the miracle stories in the Bible like that? Are they stories that embody spiritual truths without being literally true?

People often ask, "Why do some Christians take the Bible literally?" Actually, we don't take *all* of the Bible literally. When the Bible talks about God shooting arrows of lightning, we don't think a bow appeared in the sky with giant hands firing lightning bolts. We recognise it's an image, a poetic phrase. But we do believe that what the Bible intends to affirm is true. And it clearly portrays the miracles as real events.

Consider how John tells the story of the resurrection. John was one of the people in the story. He claimed to be there. And he emphasises how he and the other apostles saw Jesus and heard Jesus and even *touched* Jesus. In the next chapter he describes the risen Jesus cooking breakfast for them (John 21 v 9-13). This is not just the continuation of an ideal. This is the continuation of a real person. John presents the resurrection as a real event. John might be lying, of course. But he's certainly not telling the story as if it is a fable. He really is claiming he saw a dead man who had been resurrected to a new life.

So let me quote David Hume again: "When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I

immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived or that the fact which he relates should really have happened." Hume says there are three options:

- John is deceiving people, and the resurrection story is a hoax.
- John is deceived, and the resurrection story is a mistake.
- John is right, and the resurrection story really happened.

Is John deceiving and the resurrection story a hoax?

Perhaps the resurrection was an elaborate hoax. The problem with this explanation is that it's not clear who would perpetrate such a hoax. The *opponents* of Jesus didn't *want* him to rise again, and the *followers* of Jesus didn't *expect* him to rise again. His followers certainly didn't profit from it. Far from it—many of the early leaders of the church died for their convictions while others were imprisoned.

And if the resurrection was a hoax, then the opponents of Jesus could have quickly disproved the claim by producing the body. Instead, the historical records tell us that Jesus' enemies had to pay the Roman soldiers to say that the body was stolen from under their noses (Matthew 28 v 11-15).

Is John deceived and the resurrection story a mistake?

David Hume says, "Supernatural and miraculous stories chiefly are initiated by ignorant and uncivilised

people". In other words, he says, the disciples belonged to a superstitious world in which people would readily believe anything. Something happened that they couldn't explain, so they interpreted it as a resurrection.

But we mustn't judge the resurrection accounts by the standards of medieval superstition. We certainly mustn't have a kind of chronological snobbery in which we think we're superior to ancient people. They weren't gullible. Consider Thomas. He didn't believe his friends when they told him Jesus was risen (John 20 v 24-25). He demanded evidence. He needed proof. He wanted to be able to touch Jesus. He was a *sceptic*. Yet something happened that overcame his scepticism.

No one expected the resurrection. It wasn't that resurrection was a familiar concept that people would readily jump to. The Greeks and Romans didn't believe people could come back to life. When Paul went to Athens, they invited him to speak and we read, "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.'" (Acts 17 v 32) To the Greeks, the idea of someone rising from the dead was laughable. The Jews were divided. A Jewish group called the Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection altogether. Other Jews did believe in the resurrection, but only at the end of time. What none of them were expecting was for someone to rise from the dead in the middle of history.

Without exception, when the risen Jesus appeared to people, they were shocked and surprised. They mistook him for someone else or thought he was a ghost (John 20 v 15; Luke 24 v 37). No one expected Jesus to rise

from the dead. They weren't all waiting to jump to that conclusion without any basis in truth.

Is John right and the resurrection story really happened?

David Hume says, "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish". In other words, which is more unlikely—that the disciples were wrong or the disciples were right? That the disciples gave their lives for a story they'd made up or that an all-powerful Creator God was able to raise his Son from the dead? I suggest that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the empty tomb.

I realise my arguments are not decisive in and of themselves. There's no QED moment in the argument. But if God exists, then he must surely have the capacity to perform miracles. That can't be proved scientifically, but neither can it be *disproved* scientifically. Science looks at regular causes and effects. But miracles are *by definition* interruptions of normal cause and effect. So by definition they're outside the scope of science. This is not a debate between science and religion. It's a debate between atheism and theism in which plenty of eminent scientists line up on both sides of the debate.

The real issue is not reason, but love

Here's where Hume and I agree: Hume argues that *desire* rather than reason is what drives human thought and behaviour. He says, "Reason is, and ought only to be,

the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them".⁷ Or consider this quote from Richard Lewontin, the Professor of Genetics at Harvard University:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs ... because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.⁸

In other words, Lewontin rejects miracles because he doesn't want God. It's an admission of prejudice. I don't say that to be rude or dismissive. We all have

7 David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-1740), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (1888), Book 2, Part 3, Section 3, p 415.

8 Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons", *The New York Review*, 9 January 1997, p 31 (a review of *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* by Carl Sagan, 1997), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1297>.

our prejudices. Christians are also prejudiced. We're inclined to believe the Bible's miracles because we *do* want God.

The point is this:

- If you know God and love God, then you won't have a problem believing miracles.
- If you hate the idea of God, then you'll readily find reasons to reject both his existence and his miracles.

The real issue is not reason. The real issue is *desire* or *love*.

I can't definitively prove to you that the miracles in the Bible happened. In fact, even if someone performed a miracle in front of your eyes, that wouldn't be enough. There were plenty of people who saw the miracles of Jesus—and then plotted to kill him, as we shall see. If you're determined to reject God, then you'll always find reasons to reject his miracles. But I do want people to recognise that believing in miracles is rational if God exists. You may still reject God, but you'll be doing so for other reasons—reasons that have more to do with what you love than what you think.

Why did Jesus tell people not to tell others about his miracles?

Throughout Mark's Gospel Jesus tells spirits and people not to talk about him, especially after he has done a miracle (Mark 1 v 25, 34, 44; 3 v 12; 5 v 43; 7 v 36; 8 v 26, 30; 9 v 9). The reason for this becomes clear as the Gospel unfolds.

Jesus is God's King. But he is not the kind of king that people expect. He is the King who will die for his people. So he doesn't want people proclaiming his power until they have realised he is the King who must die. He doesn't want people following him simply because they are interested in what they can get from him—whether that is political power or a quick cure. He wants people who recognise the guilt of their sin and recognise the pardon of the cross.