

Believing in Miracles

By David Feddes

Balaam was having a bad day. He was riding his donkey to an important appointment with high hopes of getting rich, but the donkey was giving him trouble. This female donkey had always behaved well, but for some reason she picked this particular day to turn ornery. First she swerved off the road into a field. Balaam beat her and got her back on the road. Stupid donkey! Why did she pick the biggest day of her master's life to rebel?

A bit farther along, the road passed through an area with a stone wall on each side. Suddenly the donkey lurched against one of the walls, crushing Balaam's foot. Furious with pain, Balaam beat her again and drove the donkey forward.

The journey went on until the road passed through a narrow spot where there was no room to turn in any direction. Suddenly the donkey lay down under Balaam and refused to move. Balaam lost his temper. He had places to go and things to do. He hit the donkey with a walking stick over and over as hard as he could. This dumb donkey was ruining his day and making him late.

But the donkey wasn't so dumb. Suddenly she spoke: "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Balaam was too angry to think. Instead of being shocked and taken aback that an animal was talking, Balaam snarled at the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The only thing stranger than a donkey talking to a man is a man talking to a donkey.

The donkey wasn't making a fool of Balaam; Balaam was making a fool of himself. If a donkey talks, it's a miracle, and you'd better listen, not talk back. But Balaam was so mule-headed that the donkey spoke again to straighten him out. "Am I not your own donkey," she asked, "which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," Balaam admitted.

Suddenly the conversation broke off. Balaam saw something he hadn't noticed before: an angel was standing in the road. He was holding a sword. Balaam bowed and fell facedown.

That angel was the reason the donkey had first swerved off the road, then crushed Balaam's foot against a wall, then lay down beneath him. The angel and his sword had been waiting for Balaam, and if the donkey had simply kept going as her master wanted, the sword would have killed Balaam. He didn't need a guardian angel; he needed a guardian donkey!

Why was Balaam in danger from the angel? Well, Balaam had a God-given ability to foretell things, but he was a bad man. He was on his way to meet a pagan king who had promised to pay him a fortune to curse God's people, the Israelites, and predict a bad future for them. That made the Lord angry enough to send a sword against Balaam. While Balaam was wishing for a sword nearby to kill his donkey, there was a nearby sword, all right, but it would have killed Balaam if the donkey hadn't saved him.

The angel of the Lord asked Balaam, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one

before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her” (Numbers 22:32-33).

Balaam was frightened and humbled. He admitted his sin and offered to go back home. God then allowed him to go ahead and meet with the pagan king after all—but he must speak only what God would tell him to say.

Balaam obeyed. When the pagan king urged him to curse the Israelites and foretell a grim future for them, Balaam blessed them and foretold a bright future. Three times he declared blessings on them. With each blessing, the pagan king became angrier. He wanted Israel cursed, not blessed. He told Balaam that he had missed his big chance to get rich. Balaam replied that he could not foretell anything contrary to God’s message even if he were offered “a palace filled with silver and gold” (Numbers 24:13).

Then Balaam spoke one final prophecy of an ultimate ruler who would arise in Israel, not right away but in the distant future. Balaam said, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not yet. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17). Fourteen centuries later, Jesus Christ was born, accompanied by the sign of a special star.

Too Much to Swallow?

What should we think of that story? Doesn’t it sound unbelievable? Can we really believe that a donkey was able to talk, that an angel appeared carrying a sword, or that the future could be predicted 1,400 years in advance?

Some scholars and preachers try to offer a religion that will be easier to believe. They offer some ideals of social justice without calling for belief in miracles, angels, or prophecies. They trim away anything in the Bible that seems hard to believe. They say the miracle stories of the Bible are tall tales. They say that angels and spirits are fantasies from a more superstitious age and need not be taken literally. They say that predicting the future is impossible.

Talking donkeys, angels, and prophecies may be hard to swallow for people who pride themselves on being scientific and rational. But what if the hardest thing to swallow is not miracles or angels or prophecy? What if the hardest thing to swallow is our pride? If God says a donkey talked, then it is pride to contradict God. If God says an angel appeared, it is pride to contradict God. If God promised Jesus’ coming long before it happened, it is pride to contradict God and deny predictive prophecy. Bible stories are not too much to swallow if we first swallow our pride and let God be God.

Liberal theologians claim to “demythologize” Christianity in order to make it more believable for rational people, but wherever they gain influence, people stop believing and churches shrink. Should that be a surprise? Trashing the Bible’s authority and denying God’s supernatural wonders is hardly a formula for building faith and transforming lives.

What would the Bible be without miracles, angels, or prophecy? Even if a religion stripped of anything surprising or supernatural were easier to believe, would such a religion be *worth* believing? If there’s nothing in the Bible beyond our ordinary life and our usual ways of thinking, why pay attention to it? We can do just as well without it.

The Bible is full of promises and prophecies about the future. Balaam's prophecy is just one of thousands. Much of the Old Testament part of the Bible speaks of a coming Messiah, and those prophecies came true in Jesus. Other parts of the Bible speak of a future yet to come, describing the last days of this world, the return of Christ, and the new earth where Jesus will reign over everyone. Trash those prophecies, and not much would remain of Christian faith and hope. Believe those prophecies, and it will transform your spirit and your entire outlook.

The Bible is full of stories about angels. In fact, the Bible speaks of angels more than 350 times. If you cut every mention of angels out of the Bible, the Scriptures would be in tatters. Balaam wasn't the first to see an angel with a sword. Already by the third chapter of the Bible, Adam and Eve were barred from the garden of Eden by a sword-wielding angel. All through the Scriptures, angels are busy enforcing God's judgments, protecting the faithful, bringing important messages, and praising God and bringing him glory.

Miracles, Miracles

As for miracles, the Bible reveals all kinds of them. Without miracles the Bible would not be the Bible, and God would not be God. Indeed, without miracles the world would not be the world. Some people say they can't believe in miracles because miracles don't fit the laws of nature. But without miracles there would be no laws of nature and no nature at all. The world began with miracles, the grand miracles of creation, where God brought everything into being by saying, "Let there be!" What we call "laws of nature" exist only because of divine miracles in the beginning. And even after God established the world and its basic patterns of operating, those patterns have not prevented God from going beyond the usual patterns and doing miracles.

God's covenant people of Israel began with a miracle, when ninety-year old Sarah became pregnant with a baby by her ninety-nine year old husband Abraham. Centuries later, when Abraham's descendants were slaves in Egypt, God rescued them by miraculous plagues on their oppressors and by parting the Red Sea for the Israelites to pass through. On their way to the promised land, they lived on miracle food, manna from heaven. When Balaam intended to curse them on their journey, God made a donkey talk to him. The Israelites' first victory in the promised land occurred when God made Jericho's walls miraculously collapse. Another victory came when God made the sun stand still in the sky until Joshua could finish defeating the enemy.

The prophets of God did various miracles of blessing and miracles of judgment. The prophet Elijah and his successor, Elisha, were involved in some stunning miracles. When Israel was especially wicked under King Ahab, Elijah prayed to God and said there would be no rain for three years, and there was a dreadful drought. Then Elijah said it would rain, and it poured. When Elijah needed food, God sent ravens to feed him. A poor widow who helped Elijah found that her supply of flour never went down and her olive oil never ran out. When her son died, Elijah prayed and raised him from the dead. When a king sent soldiers to capture and kill Elijah, the prophet called down fire from heaven that burned them up. When Elijah's life on earth at last came to an end, it was not in death but with chariots of fire coming down and taking him directly to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elijah's apprentice, Elisha, took over where his master left off. Elijah had made the Jordan River part in order to cross it, and Elisha did the same thing. When the water of a town was bad, Elisha made it good. When a gang of idol-worshiping youths mocked Elisha, he cursed them, and two bears mauled them in a miraculous judgment. When a poor widow ran out of money and her creditor was about to enslave her sons, Elisha enabled her to pour gallon after gallon of olive oil from a tiny jug; and when she sold the oil, she had more money than she needed. When a man and woman suffering from infertility helped Elisha, he promised them a miraculous pregnancy. Their child later died, but Elisha raised him back to life.

When some people ate poison and were about to die, Elisha healed them. When a hungry crowd didn't have enough food, Elisha turned the shortage into a surplus. When a general from a neighboring country had incurable leprosy, Elisha healed him. When Elisha's assistant got greedy for money, he was judged by getting leprosy. A young prophet was working on a new building for training prophets when the head of his ax fell off and landed in the deep water. Elisha simply threw a stick into the water, the iron axhead floated up to the surface, and the young man retrieved it.

When an enemy king was plotting to conquer Israel, Elisha miraculously knew every move the king was planning. When that king's soldiers surrounded the place where Elisha was staying, God blinded them all until they could be captured. Even after Elisha died and was buried, one final miracle took place. A funeral procession panicked when a gang of robbers was coming after them. They threw the dead body in a tomb and ran off. The tomb turned out to be Elisha's. When the dead man's body touched Elisha's bones, the man came back to life again.

When the prophet Jonah was about to drown in the sea, God sent a great fish to rescue the prophet from drowning. The fish swallowed Jonah, carried him inside for three days, and then spit him out on land, unharmed.

When three young men were thrown into a fiery furnace for being faithful to God, an angel entered the furnace with them and kept them from harm. They left the furnace without a hair being singed, without even a smell of smoke on them. When the prophet Daniel was thrown into a den of hungry lions, God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths.

The Old Testament records these miracles and more—and the main event was yet to come. When the Lord himself came to earth in the person of Jesus, his miracles surpassed any before. Jesus was born of a virgin. He made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the mute to speak, the lame to walk, the dead to live. He walked on waves, gave orders to storms, turned water to wine, and fed thousands of people from just one picnic basket. Jesus did miracles great and numerous beyond description. His ultimate miracle was his own resurrection victory over death and his ascension to the throne of heaven. Jesus' apostles carried on where he left off, healing sick people and even bringing some dead people back to life.

Miracles are not just "extras" in the Bible that we can take or leave. We can't believe in the Bible as the Word of God without believing in miracles. We can't believe in Jesus as the Son of God without believing in miracles.

Questions About Miracles

Questioning miracles is fine—as long as we ask the right questions. The question is not, “Are miracles possible?” They are, no question about it. With God all things are possible. The question is not, “Did the miracles described in the Bible really happen?” They did, no question about it. The Bible is God’s Word, and God always tells the truth. There are some things about miracles we shouldn’t question, but here are some questions we should ask: What does the miracle show about God? Where does the miracle fit in God’s historic plan of salvation in Jesus? How does the story of this miracle apply here and now?

We can apply these questions to the biggest, most world-changing miracles, but for now let’s look at a few miracles that may seem less important: the donkey that talked to Balaam and the iron axhead that floated for Elisha. These mini-miracles don’t rank up there with the parting of the Red Sea that enabled a nation to escape slavery and death, or with the resurrection of Jesus which decisively defeated death and guaranteed eternal life to humanity. But even smaller miracles tell us big things.

What does the story of the talking donkey tell us about God? One thing it tells us is that God can speak by any method he chooses. Balaam wouldn’t listen to reason or conscience, so he had to listen to a talking donkey instead. Some rationalistic scholars might dismiss the talking donkey as a legend that’s too silly for enlightened people to believe. The irony is that they’re becoming the sort of people who don’t deserve to hear God’s Word from any source higher than a donkey. St. Peter, writing more than fourteen centuries after Balaam, compared some greedy, unbelieving preachers of his own day to Balaam, who “was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—a beast without speech—who spoke with a man’s voice and restrained the prophet’s madness” (2 Peter 2:16). God speaks truth, and if a preacher goes against God, a donkey is wiser than the preacher.

What else does the story show about God? He gets angry at evil, yet he is also merciful. Balaam’s desire to curse Israel was dead wrong, and God sent the angel with the sword. But God showed mercy by enabling the donkey to talk. The angel could have killed Balaam on the spot, but instead God used the donkey to get the wicked man’s attention, and the Lord spared his life.

Where does this miracle fit in God’s historic plan of salvation and how does it point to Jesus? Well, God chose Abraham and his descendants to receive God’s Word and eventually to produce the Messiah, the Savior of the World. Balaam wanted to curse Abraham’s offspring, the Israelites, but God prevented it and declared blessings instead of curses. After the donkey rebuked Balaam, God made Balaam foretell the star and the Savior who would rescue God’s people from all their enemies.

How does the story of this miracle apply to us here and now? It calls us to fear God’s wrath, trust his mercy, and believe in the promised Savior. The story also warns against certain things. Balaam was on the wrong road because he was greedy, and greed is bad in anyone, especially in a preacher. Balaam was cruel to an animal, but the Bible says, “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal” (Proverbs 12:10).

Balaam had a great spiritual gift without having a healthy relationship with God. That’s a stern warning against thinking we’re acceptable to God just because he gives us certain powers or insights. Jesus warned that some people with genuine miraculous powers are evildoers headed for hell (Matthew 7:22-23). The Bible says, “If I have the

gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). Faith and love, not prophecy or fund-raising, are the signs of a healthy relationship to God.

Another thing we can learn from Balaam’s donkey is that sometimes our troubles are not enemies but friends. Balaam was furious at his donkey that day, but if Balaam had been able to go forward uninterrupted, he would have been killed. Balaam didn’t need an angel to save him from troubles; he needed troubles to save him from an angel. When things don’t go your way, don’t lose your temper. Instead, learn your lesson.

Balaam was foolish to beat and snarl at a donkey, but how many of us swear at a computer or kick a car? We gripe about traffic problems, sickness, uncooperative people, anything that delays us from getting where we’re trying to go. But what if we’re on the wrong road, headed for a sword of judgment? If your donkey gives you grief, if trouble stops you in your tracks, don’t curse your trouble. It may be telling you something. Are you traveling in the wrong direction? Are you disobeying God? If so, you don’t need angels to guard you from troubles; you need troubles to guard you from angels! You need to change course and seek the Lord before it’s too late.

Show and Tell

In the Bible, God doesn’t just give orders and state principles. He does unforgettable miracles to make his point. He not only tells us his ways but he *shows* his ways, often through the real-life miracles recorded in the Bible. Consider the story of the axhead that floated.

Part of the prophet Elisha’s ministry was training other prophets and preachers. The group of students became so large that they had to add a larger building. While one of them was cutting down a tree to get timber, the iron head flew off his ax and fell into the water. The ax was borrowed. You might think, “A lost axhead? Big deal. Just go to the store and buy another one.” But iron tools were hard to get and costly to replace. The poor student didn’t know what to do. He told Elisha of his problem.

The man of God asked, “Where did it fall?” When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float. “Lift it out,” he said.

Then the man reached out his hand and took it. 2 Kings 6:6-7

Does that sound like a silly miracle? If God Almighty wants to make an exception to his law of gravity, shouldn’t he do something more important than making an axhead float? Parting the Red Sea to rescue a nation—now there’s a big-time miracle! Retrieving an axhead seems minor. The person involved is minor, just a poor student. Losing a borrowed axhead might be a big deal to him, but in the grand scheme of things, it’s nothing.

What does this mini-miracle show about God? Where does it fit in God’s plan of salvation through Jesus? How does the story of this miracle apply to us here and now? The floating axhead plainly shows that the Lord of the universe loves minor people and cares about their minor problems. Nothing is too small and nobody too unimportant for God to care. “Indeed,” says Jesus, “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Luke 12:7).

If it seems foolish for the Almighty to care about little things and little people, let’s take all the foolishness he’ll give us. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s

wisdom,” says the Bible. “God chose the foolish things... He chose the lowly things” (1 Corinthians 1:25-28). Those words about God choosing the lowly things come not just in connection with the mini-miracle of an axhead but in describing how the cross of Christ saves a bunch of nobodies.

God does mini-miracles for minor people, and he does major miracles for them too. He rescues them from hell through Jesus’ blood, he makes his home in their hearts through his Holy Spirit, and he destines them to reign with him forever. Whether the Lord is making an axhead float or walking on water himself, whether he is making a donkey talk or proclaiming his Word in the Sermon on the Mount, whether Christ is hanging on a cross or rising from the dead and ruling the universe, the Lord works all things for the good of those who love him.

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