

BARF ON THE BEACH
A Fish Tale: Isn't the Bible Hard to Swallow?
A Study of Jonah 1:17, 2:10

Characteristic of Completeness: Authority of the Bible

Big Idea: The miracle of Jonah points us to the miracle of Jesus.

Related Scriptures: Genesis 1:1; 2 Kings 14:25; Psalm 103:19; Isaiah 55:9; Matthew 12:39-40; John 10:25; 14:11; 1 Corinthians 15:12-19; Ephesians 1:11; Philippians 2:13; Colossians 1:17

Introduction

1. My family took a little vacation to the beach. My son and I were out in the ocean, boogie boarding, when a big fish came up, swallowed my son whole, and swam away.

Ruined our vacation. Ruined it for three days anyway. You see, after three days, the big fish barfed up my son on the beach. Turns out, he's fine. He's a little bleached. That's why he has a lighter complexion than his sister. And he has a lingering fish smell. But otherwise he's fine.

2. My fish tale is a little hard to swallow, isn't it? You're skeptical. Who wouldn't be?

In our study through the Bible book of Jonah, we come today to a story that's similarly hard to swallow. Two weeks ago, we were introduced to the prophet Jonah, a man running from God. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach; instead, he boards a ship headed in the opposite direction. The Lord brings a great storm, Jonah finds himself overboard, and he's swallowed by a big fish. He's in the belly of the fish for three days, and then the fish barfs him up on the beach, intact. Jonah ► 1:17 says,

^{NKJ} Jonah 1:17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Skip down to Jonah 2:10, and ► it says,

^{NKJ} Jonah 2:10 So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry *land*.

There you go. Barf on the beach. How are we to take this? Are we to take it literally? Or is it just a fictional story that carries a moral lesson?

3. This morning, I want to use the story of Jonah and the fish as a springboard to answering ► three important questions that serve as the outline of my sermon.
 - a. First, ► are the miracles in the Bible simply myths and legends designed to create religious faith and teach moral lessons?

- b. Second, ► how can a rational person today accept the stories of miracles in the Bible since they are contrary to the laws of modern science?
- c. And third, ► if there were miracles in history, then why doesn't God perform miracles today?

These questions relate to the authority of the Bible. In fact, ► the Authority of the Bible is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. Can we trust the Bible? Is it reliable?

- 4. Before ► we get to the questions, I'd like to lay a little groundwork.
 - a. First, let's define a miracle. Let's use ► this as a working definition: A miracle is an event specially caused by God that violates one or more laws of nature.¹ That is, a miracle is something that occurs that is so different from the ordinary operations of nature that it can be attributed to direct intervention of a supernatural agent. In other words, a miracle is something that can't be explained by nature; it's supernatural, or above and beyond nature.²
 - b. Given this definition of a miracle, I suppose one could try to argue that the story of Jonah and the fish is not a miracle at all.

There are sea creatures big enough to swallow a man whole. Blue whales are big enough. Blue females average 85 to 95 feet long. They are found in all the Oceans and have been known to ingest live animals caught in the sea—goats, dogs, small cattle—keep them in their sinus cavity until they get to land and then blow them out near the shore.³

Nevertheless, ► Jonah 1:17 describes this creature as a fish, not a whale. It says,

^{NKJ}Jonah 1:17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

¹ R. Douglas Geivett, "Why I Believe in the Possibility of Miracles," *Why I Am A Christian*, rev. ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 112.

² I understand that some thinkers have defined a miracle as something that simply cannot happen because they believe the uniformity of natural law to be inviolable. The argument goes something like this. Miracles never happen. Why? Because miracles cannot happen. Why? Because miracles never happen. This strikes me as arguing in a circle.

³ Paul D. Brown, "On a Problem Passage . . . Jonah 1:17," Western Seminary Paper, March 26, 1991, p. 5.

The original Hebrew word used here describes a fish. There is different word in Hebrew that probably would have been used to describe a whale.⁴ So this is most likely a fish, not a whale.

Well, are there some fish big enough? There are. Whale sharks are big enough. They are actually fish, not whales. Some have have measured over 60 feet long.⁵ There was a news report on these whale sharks on Channel 12 just last Tuesday. I was watching it at my dentist's office while getting my teeth cleaned. Apparently, the bigger ones are about the size of a school bus. They do not have teeth. They feed on plankton. Listen to their feeding habits:

*They lay almost motionless asleep on the surface of the ocean until attacked by hunger. Then they open their gigantic mouth and swim at an irresistible speed through the water and anything in the path gets drawn into the wide open mouth.*⁶

There are a number of historical accounts of men being swallowed by fish, remaining in the fish for an extended period, and living to tell about it. Frankly, I don't really know how reliable these accounts are. Here's one of them:

*Dr. Harry Rimmer, President of the Research Science Bureau of Los Angeles, writes . . . "In the Literary Digest we noticed an account of an English fisherman who was swallowed by a gigantic Whale Shark in the English Channel. Briefly, the account stated that in the attempt to harpoon one of these monstrous sharks, this sailor fell overboard, and before he could be picked up again, the shark turned and engulfed him. Forty eight hours later the shark surfaced and the British navy killed it with a one-pound deck gun. They towed the shark to shore and were in the process of cutting it apart to find their friend and give him a Christian burial, when to their amazement they found he was alive. He had lost all his hair, fingernails, and toenails, and had a yellowish blotched skin."*⁷

I don't understand exactly how this worked. There must have been an air pocket inside. The air quality was probably not great. You know, fish breath. And, the humidity levels were probably way beyond August in Phoenix.

If Jonah-and-the-fish-type incidents have happened before, one could argue this doesn't exactly fit our definition of a miracle.

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Ibid, 7.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Harry Rimmer, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 185, quoted by Brown, 8.

- c. But there's really no getting around the miraculous nature of the Jonah story. Even if the big-fish super shuttle somehow contradicts no natural laws—which would be a stretch—we are still left with the first part of ► Verse 17 that says the Lord “prepared” the fish. That means the Lord called for the super shuttle. God scheduled it. That, in itself, is miraculous. So we're right back to having to deal with miracles in the Bible. So, let's return to the three questions posed earlier and consider them in some detail.
- I. First, ► are the miracles in the Bible simply myths and legends designed to create religious faith and teach moral lessons? Is this story about Jonah intended to be a true, historical account, or is it fiction intended to teach a lesson?
- A. Biblical evidence indicates that this is history, not fiction.
1. First of all, Jonah is a real, historical figure.
- a. This is confirmed by the Bible. In ► 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah is presented as a real person, the son of a real father, who lived in a real city. It says,
- ^{NKJ} 2 Kings 14:25 . . . the LORD God of Israel . . . had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher.
- Jonah is presented as a real person, not a fictional character.
- b. The ► historicity of Jonah seems to be further corroborated by archeology.⁸
- (1) Archeologists have discovered a grave in northern Israel which, according to the inscription, contains a prophet named Jonah.
- (2) In addition, some ancient coins have been unearthed with the image of a man coming out of a fish's mouth.
2. Jonah is not only presented as a real person, but also, the account of Jonah and the fish bears none of the marks of a biblical parable or allegory. Parables and allegories are fictional stories intended to communicate a spiritual truth.

⁸ Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 308.

If it were a parable, we would expect some sort of explicit comparison such as, “it is like.” Using parables, Jesus said things like, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed (Matthew 13:31).” But there is no such comparative language Jonah.

And, biblical allegories are rare and accompanied by an interpretation. If it were an allegory, we would expect an interpretation. But Jonah gives us no allegorical interpretation.

Therefore, from a literary standpoint, it is written as historical narrative, not fiction.

3. And finally, Jesus Himself seems to consider the Jonah-in-the-fish story to be factual. In ► Matthew 12:39-40, Jesus says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 12:39 . . . “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

It seems pretty clear that the story of Jonah is intended to be a true, historical account, and that Jesus understood it that way.

- B. You see, Christianity ► is distinctive in that its teaching is built largely on the miraculous acts of God which are presented as true, historical accounts. In most other religions, there are comparatively few accounts of miracles, and even if you remove these miracles, many of the religions would not crumble. Not so with Christianity, which stands or falls on the validity of miracles presented in the Bible.

1. It begins in the ► very first verse in the Bible:

^{NKJ} Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

This is a miracle. We have no natural laws to explain how the heavens and the earth came from nothing.

2. Moreover, Jesus Himself affirms the importance of miracles in His day. In ► John 10:25, He says,

^{NIV} John 10:25 “. . . The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me”

In ► John 14:11, He also says,

^{NIV} John 14:11 “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.”

3. And so, the Bible seems to leave no room for anti-supernatural Christians. Anti-supernatural Christians are those who dismiss the authenticity of miracles in the Bible, but still try to glean moral lessons from the Bible. The Apostle Paul says that, if there are no miracles—and specifically, if there was no miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ—then Christianity is “empty,” “futile,” and “most pitiable.” Beginning in ► 1 Corinthians 15:14, Paul says,

^{NKJ} 1 Corinthians 15:14 And if Christ is not risen [that is, if there is no such miracle], then our preaching *is* empty and your faith *is* also empty. . . . 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins! . . . 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

- C. So, ► in answer to our first question, the miracles of the Bible are presented as historical facts to be accepted or rejected. They are not presented as fairy tales, myths, or legends.

II. Now, ► let’s move on to the second question. How can a rational person today accept the stories of miracles in the Bible since they are contrary to the laws of science?

- A. First, let’s address the question of the laws of science.
 1. The laws of science are merely our explanations of the way things work based on our observation and testing. We observe nature, formulate a theory about how something works, test the theory repeatedly, and reject or accept our theory. If we accept it, it becomes a law.
 2. The scientific method is, by definition, limited in scope to the study of natural, ordinary, orderly phenomena which are observable and repeatable.
- B. The problem is, miracles, by definition, are accomplished by supernatural agency and have no natural explanation. They are empowered by something higher than nature, hence the term supernatural.

Humans probably learned something about the law of gravity early on. Take a flying leap off a sheer cliff and the law of gravity will take you down to an untimely end. But later we learned something about the law of aerodynamics. Take a flying leap off the same sheer cliff with a hang glider and the results can be quite different. The principle of aerodynamics overcomes the pull of gravity. You don’t flop; you fly. One natural law trumps another, but they are not contradictory.

A miracle can be viewed as one law trumping another—the supernatural trumping the natural. And if an all-powerful supernatural God created the natural laws in the first place, wouldn't it be perfectly reasonable for Him to be able to supernaturally overcome His natural laws any time He wants for whatever reason He wants? Wouldn't it be reasonable to think that, if God exists, He's operating in a dimension well above our laws of science, a dimension that we cannot explain? I think so.

I generally understand and appreciate the aspect of science that always seeks a natural explanation for things we don't understand. I'm thankful that science finds natural explanations for things. We benefit from such progress. But to say that, because we have found natural explanations for many things, there must be a natural explanation for all things, is leap of faith every bit as large as believing that God is calling the shots and they include laws of science *and* miracles.

In Isaiah ► 55:9, God tells us:

^{NKJ} Isaiah 55:9 “For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

At the end of the day, everybody lives by faith. We are merely distinguished by the objects of our faith. Faith in our ways. Or faith in His.

- C. Let's ► reconsider the question. How can a rational person today accept the stories of miracles in the Bible since they are contrary to the laws of science? A rational person can accept biblical miracles because God operates in a dimension above our laws of science, a dimension that we can't explain.
- III. Let's ► move on to the third question. If there were miracles then, why doesn't God perform miracles today? Where is He?

I suspect there are some mistaken ideas behind this question.

- A. For example, there is a mistaken idea that miracles happened all the time in the Bible.
 - 1. The fact is, the miracles of the Bible are concentrated around three relatively brief time periods when God was communicating to His people in a new way, and the miracles served primarily to authenticate God's message and His messengers. The three time periods include the times of Moses and Joshua, the times of Elijah and Elisha, the times of Christ and the apostles.⁹

⁹ Ken Boa and Larry Moody, *I'm Glad You Asked: In Depth Answers to Difficult Questions about Christianity*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1994), 52.

2. In the Bible, sometimes two, three, or even four centuries went by without a single recorded miracle.¹⁰
 3. Indeed, if miracles were consistently commonplace then I suppose they would, by definition, cease to be miracles; they would be the way things usually work.
 4. I believe we happen to live in a time when miracles are not commonplace. I'm not saying that miracles don't happen today. God can do anything He wants anytime He wants, including the miraculous. But, today, they're not a dime a dozen.
- B. There is also the mistaken idea that if something isn't miraculous, God is not in it—that God did all the big stuff in the past and is just sort of checked out these days.

The fact is God is actively involved in the world today. God's involvement is supernatural and miraculous; no natural laws can explain it. The Bible confirms God involvement.

1. God maintains His creation; He is the author and sustainer of nature. Colossians ► 1:17 says,

^{NAU} Colossians 1:17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.
 2. God is also active in His creation. He is at work. Philippians ► 2:13 says,

^{NRJ} Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure.
 3. God also guides His creation. He sovereignly rules it. Psalm ► 103:19 says,

^{NAU} Psalm 103:19 The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all.
- C. So, ► let's revisit the question. If there were miracles then, why doesn't God perform miracles today? Where is He?

Well, God uses miracles strategically and often sparingly. Our day is not radically different from many times in biblical history when miracles were not commonplace. But, God is still involved. He still cares.

¹⁰ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 4, s.v. "miracles," by G.H. Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, 1976), 249.

- IV. We've ► answered the three questions this morning. The miracles of the Bible are presented as historical facts to be accepted or rejected. A rational person can accept biblical miracles because God operates in a dimension above our laws of science. And in history, God uses miracles strategically and sparingly, so we should not be surprised that miracles do not seem commonplace today.

I want to conclude by addressing a fourth question which has very important and practical implications for us this morning: Why? Why did God orchestrate the miracle of Jonah and the fish? Clearly, God wants this miraculous story to stand out. What's in it for us?

Here's what I think. I think the miracle of Jonah and the fish points us to the greatest miracle in history: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's ► the big idea of my sermon: The miracle of Jonah points us to the miracle of Jesus. Jesus Himself makes the connection in a passage we looked at earlier, Matthew ► 12:39-40. Jesus says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 12:39 . . . "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Here's His point. Just as Jonah arose from the belly of the fish alive, so Christ rose from the grave alive after three days. That's the miracle God presents to us as an invitation to believe that Christ is our Savior. Not a myth. Not a legend. Not a fictional story with a moral lesson. The miracle of Jonah points to the miracle of Jesus. Just as Jonah was buried for three days, so was Jesus. Just as Jonah was resurrected, so was Jesus. Just as the resurrection of Jonah is presented as an historical fact, so is the resurrection of Jesus.

Certainly the apostles—those who were with Jesus as eyewitnesses—they did not behave in a way consistent with the resurrection being a myth or legend. They derived absolutely no earthly benefit from proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. No improvement in prestige, wealth, or social status. Instead, for persisting in their belief in a risen Savior, they were beaten, stoned to death, thrown to lions, tortured, and crucified. For a myth? For a legend? To manipulate people to believe a lie? To teach a moral lesson? No. It was to save the world! To save you and me.

And so, I'm wondering. I'm wondering if you're looking for a sign this morning. A sign that would make it obvious. A sign that would somehow give you the go-ahead to believe in Jesus. A sign that would make following Him easy. A sign that would almost make the decision for you.

But the signs are already there. There to be accepted or rejected. Accepted or rejected by faith. The miracle of Jonah points us to the miracle of Jesus.