

Can former journalist Lee Strobel make a convincing case for miracles?

🕒 March 14, 2018 📖 11 Min Read



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A few years ago, I experienced a miracle at a writing conference outside of Boston, Massachusetts. Following a talk I gave on storytelling, a group of women approached me and one stepped forward: “We have a word from God for you.”

I froze but maintained a cautious smile.

The women explained that they were friends who had met at a church with a long name that had the word “revelatory” in it. It sounded like the type of place that calls its pastor “Apostle” and lets people dance while he preaches. As a Southern Baptist, I’ve always been skeptical of these kind of Christians. Maybe I’m afraid that their Holy Spirit juju might somehow rub off on me, and I’ll have an experience I won’t be able to explain. I know now that the fear is well-founded.

“Can we pray over you and anoint you?” one asked.

Not wanting to be rude, I agreed.



And then it happened. One by one these women told me things about myself that they could not have known—things that I'd never shared with anyone. And then they delivered a message, an encouragement, that I now believe was from God. I shared this story in full in my book "[Jesus is Better Than You Imagined](#)," and it is not the only time I've inexplicably encountered transcendence.

I believe in miracles because I've experienced them.

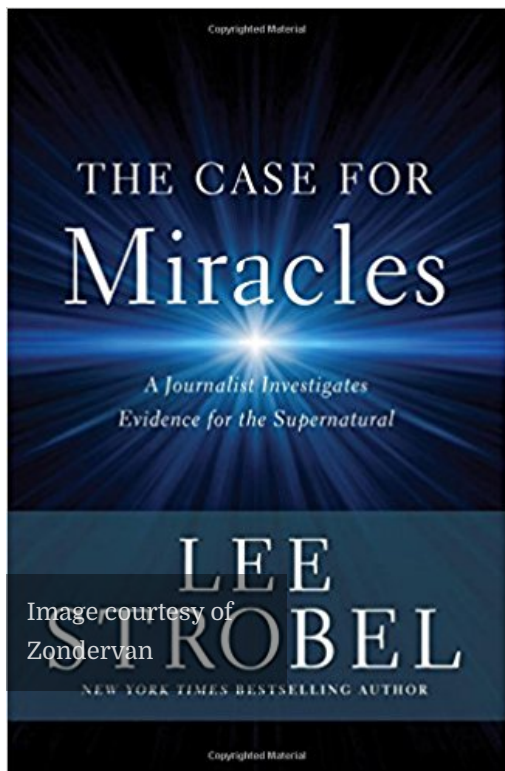
But my testimonial is not enough to convince others. Certainly not stalwart skeptics and the non-religious. And that's where Lee Strobel hopes to contribute to the cause. As the former legal editor of *The Chicago Tribune*, he has created a cottage industry around investigating Christian claims and making an evidence-based "case" for everything from [Jesus's Resurrection](#) to [faith itself](#).

Strobel's new book, "[The Case for Miracles: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for the Supernatural](#)," features a lot of miracle accounts, rational arguments, and a fascinating poll of Americans. I question whether it is effective to judge mystical events by logical standards, so I decided to discuss these matters with Strobel myself.

RNS: Let's start by defining terms. How do you define a "miracle?"

LS: My two-year investigation of the supernatural blew my mind. But like you, I needed to start out with a meaningful definition of miracles, especially since it's a term used in many differing ways -- and often flippantly. A lot of philosophers have given it their best shot. Augustine was poetic. He said a miracle is "whatever appears that is difficult or unusual above the hope and power of them who wonder." Oxford's Richard Swinburne was straightforward. He called a miracle "an event of an extraordinary kind brought about by a god and of religious significance."

I prefer the definition offered by the late philosopher Richard L. Purtill: "A miracle is an event (1) brought about by the power of God that is (2) a temporary (3) exception (4) to the ordinary course of nature (5) for the purpose of showing that God has acted in history."



RNS: You partnered with Barna to conduct a survey for [this book](#). So tell us: do Americans believe in miracles?

LS: Yes, they do – more than I anticipated. Half of Americans (51 percent) said they believe the miracles of the Bible happened as they are described. That's pretty high in our increasingly skeptical culture. Two out of three (67 percent) said miracles are possible today. Only 15 percent said they aren't. One sidelight: Republicans are more likely to believe in modern miracles (74 percent) than Democrats (61 percent). I'm not commenting on that – just presenting the facts.

RNS: How many Americans claim to have personally experienced a miracle?

LS: This is where the research really gets interesting. Nearly two out of five US adults (38 percent) said they have had an experience that they can only explain as being a miracle of God. By extrapolation, that means 94,792,000 American adults are convinced that God has performed at least one miracle for them personally. That's an astonishing number. Now, let's say 95 percent of those cases are actually astounding coincidences that can be explained through natural means. That would still leave more than 4.7 million miracles, and that's just in the United States.

“Skeptic” magazine scoffs that supernatural reports are “more common from the uncivilized and uneducated.” Yet another study showed that 55 percent of US physicians said they have seen results in their patients that they would consider miraculous. That’s coming from highly educated professionals trained in medicine, often in very secular settings.

RNS: In [your book](#), you spend a lot of time documenting people who share unexplainable events. It seems to me that this, at least partly, roots your argument in *experience* rather than *evidence*. What am I missing?

LS: A person’s experience can have evidential value. However, the evidence is amplified if we also have corroboration in the form of multiple other eyewitnesses who are trustworthy and have no bias or reason to lie; medical tests before and after a supposed healing; or other kinds of more objective facts. I’m as skeptical of miracle claims as the next person. However, I believe they are possible, and I’m willing to examine the evidence in each case to conclude whether it’s actually a misdiagnosis, the placebo effect, fakery, spontaneous remission, or there’s some sort of other natural explanation – or whether it can truly be best described as a divine intervention.

RNS: I’ve heard skeptics often say that to believe in “miracles” would be to deny science because, after all, miracles violate the established and observed laws of nature. How do you respond?

LS: Scottish skeptic David Hume called a miracle “a violation of the laws of nature” – and you can’t violate the laws of nature, right? Hume’s critique is still touted by skeptics today, but my book demonstrates that Hume’s approach is fatally flawed. In fact, philosophers have decimated Hume in recent years, as illustrated by the title of a recent book by a non-Christian scholar published by Oxford University Press: [*Hume’s Abject Failure*](#).

Actually, miracles are not a violation of the laws of nature. For example, if I drop an apple, the law of gravity tells me it will hit the floor. But if I drop the apple and you reach in and grab it before it hits the floor, you haven’t violated the law of gravity – you’ve merely intervened. And that’s what God does in performing a miracle – he intervenes in the world that he created.

As philosopher William Lane Craig told me, natural laws have implicit *ceteris paribus* conditions, which is Latin for “all other things being equal.” In other words, natural laws assume that no other natural or supernatural factors are interfering with the operation that the law generally describes.

Craig explained that if there’s a supernatural agent that’s working in the natural world, then the idealized conditions described by the law are no longer in effect. The law isn’t violated because the law has this implicit provision that no outside forces are messing around with the conditions.

RNS: I have friend who often makes decisions based on recurring dreams that they believe are from God. What do you think about that? Can dreams or visions be considered miracles?

LS: The Bible contains about 200 examples of God using dreams and visions to further his plans. I devote an entire chapter to analyzing the supernatural phenomenon of Jesus appearing in dreams of Muslims, usually in countries closed to the gospel.

However, we need to be very careful about dreams; everything must be weighed against scripture. In the cases I cite, there’s some sort of external corroboration – for instance, the dreamer encounters someone in his dream who he has never met, and then he subsequently meets that individual in person – and this individual explains the gospel to them. This kind of external validation is helpful in weighing the legitimacy of dreams and visions.

That said, when you hear story after story of devout Muslims who are encountering the divine Jesus in supernatural ways, and then risking everything to follow him, it’s both jaw-dropping and inspiring.

I think this is one of the most exciting parts of [the book](#).

RNS: There are many accounts of miracles, similar to those you cite, but told by people of other faiths. There's a litany of miracle stories of those who follow the teachings of Buddha or worship Krishna. If I'm going to believe your "evidence," wouldn't I have to also conclude that there is something to these stories? Why should I accept the miracle stories of Christians and not the identical stories told by Muslims, Jews, Mormons, and others?

LS: Not all miracle reports are equally credible. For instance, the supposed miracles associated with Buddha or Krishna are shrouded in the mists of history and legend, and are often written by unknown sources and without specific references to historic times and places, so they lack the credibility of historical biblical accounts. The supposed miracles of Muhammad are only in the *hadith*, which is Islamic tradition that comes hundreds of years after his life and therefore isn't comparable to the gospels, which were recorded within the first generation when eyewitnesses were still living. The miracles of Mormonism lack credibility because of the unreliability of Joseph Smith and many of his early followers.

In contrast, the key miracle of Jesus – his resurrection from the dead – is corroborated by excellent historical data, as I demonstrate in [my book](#). We have five sources outside the Bible confirming his death. We have a report of the resurrection that has been dated by scholars to within months of his death – too early to be a mere legend. We have an empty tomb that even the opponents of Jesus implicitly conceded was empty. And we have nine ancient sources, inside and outside the New Testament, affirming the conviction of the disciples that they had encountered the risen Jesus. That's an avalanche of historical data that isn't matched by any miracle claims in another any other tradition.

RNS: I believe in miracles because, among other things, I've experienced them in my life. But your approach is to make a "case" for them rooted in evidence and logic. Doesn't this ignore the mysterious nature of the supernatural and the miraculous?

LS: Evidence and experience are both important, which is why I explore both of these components in [The Case for Miracles](#). Your experience of the miraculous may be valid, but it might not be convincing to others. That's where corroboration comes in. Skeptics – like me a few years back – are much more apt to believe the supernatural when presented with credible reports by unbiased eyewitnesses, medical records, etc. I hope [my book](#) will challenge the skepticism of non-believers, while at the same time encouraging and strengthening the faith of Christians. To do that, the more substantiation, the better. Honestly, I don't think documentation strips away the mystery of miracles – to me, it elicits even more awe and wonder, along with the confidence to share the miraculous reports with others.

RNS: You mention that some churches are embarrassed by the supernatural. How would you advise churches to acknowledge and process when their congregants claim to have experienced a miracle?

LS: I believe many evangelical and mainline churches are embarrassed by the supernatural. They want to be considered respectable by their neighbors and not be conflated with the bizarre antics of some TV faith healers. They crave acceptability, order, and predictability. I can understand this, since there are plenty of charlatans out there to distance ourselves from. But the Holy Spirit cannot be put in a box. He will do as He wishes. We should be open to whatever God may want to do, even when He disrupts our carefully planned world.

Now, when miracle claims are made, I don't think we should automatically accept them. It's always wise to scrutinize them – are they consistent with Scripture, are they confirmed or validated by witnesses or medical records, and so forth. The Bible warns us to "[test everything...hold on to what is good](#)." Certainly Catholics have been investigating miracles for centuries when they consider a person for sainthood in their tradition. Similarly, when we see what appears to be a divine work of the Lord –

like some of the well-documented miracles in [*The Case for Miracles*](#) – we should not only accept them, but also praise Him for His gracious intervention on behalf of people He so clearly loves.

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