

Cross Current



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A Few Striking Observations

As I once learned during an encounter with wild elephants while doing a documentary in Africa, the difference between a fabulous story and absolute tragedy is often just a matter of metres or a few seconds. I just got another stark reminder.



While I was outside a hotel in Dayton, Ohio with my wife, Susan, a driving rainstorm pounded the ground with a heavy barrage of watery bullets. Suddenly, a circle of intense white light bigger than a basketball materialized about three metres (ten feet) away, hovering two and a half metres (eight feet) off the ground. Almost immediately, the orb of electricity exploded from side to side with a deafening clap and a blinding flash. I felt the energy rake my chest from left to right and the explosion left my ears ringing.

It appears we had a close encounter with ball lightning, a controversial phenomenon that continues to divide the scientific community. Though lab experiments have produced effects that look like the ball lightning reported by eyewitnesses, researchers still aren't sure about its true nature. That's largely because ball lightning is relatively rare, thoroughly unpredictable and reports vary widely. But while once considered a hoax or hallucination, the electrical orbs are now generating serious scientific discussion.

Though sightings date back to ancient times, there are several more recent reports. In July 1907, a lighthouse in western Australia was hit, knocking keeper Patrick Baird unconscious. His daughter saw the whole thing. During the Second World War, pilots reported small spheres of light moving in strange directions and named them *foo fighters*, which is where the rock band got its name. And in August 1944, ball lightning reportedly smashed through a closed window in



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Uppsala, Sweden, leaving a circular, five-centimetre hole. There were several witnesses and the hit was recorded by a lightning strike tracking system at a nearby university.

Though details vary, most reports of ball lightning describe it as round with fuzzy edges, between ten and twenty-centimetres around, and white, red, orange or yellow. The lightning can last up to a minute, hover or move in any direction, and follow conductors such as wires or metal fences. Ball lightning disappears suddenly — quietly or with an explosion — and sometimes leaves an odour like ozone or sulphur.

As for my experience, some think God was telling me something. I'm unconvinced because, in Biblical cases, when God spoke to his people through natural phenomena they knew categorically the event was from him and he always told them specifically what he wanted.

Still, I was struck by how the debate over the existence of ball lightning and of God himself are similar. For example, scientists can see the evidence of God's existence, even if they can't fully understand his true nature purely on the basis of data. That's why, in virtually every field, many of the world's greatest scientists are believers.

Second, when true miracles happen, they're often unpredictable and relatively rare, at least in the usual scheme of things, or they wouldn't *be* miracles. They don't follow a cookie-cutter pattern, but there are common biblical traits: they defy natural explanation, timing is significant, their effects are usually permanent and complete (in healings, for example), and they're always done for a spiritual purpose, notably "*so you may continue to believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life in his name.*" (John 20:31)

There's an abundance of compelling evidence that God exists and the Bible is his inspired Word but, ultimately, that evidence must be verified by experience. As I'm fond of saying, God doesn't care about our *ability*, only our *availability*, and it's not the *size* of our faith that matters but the *exercise* of our faith. When we're open to God, we'll see his fingerprints everywhere, we'll know clearly when he's at work in our lives — complete with confirmation — and we'll find our experience has much in common with other believers.

To go from knowing *about* God to *knowing* God takes openness and trust. Start small, but be ready to go big. The experience will jolt you into a whole new reality.