

# “People in Hell DIE, Not Suffer Forever!”

In answer to the e-mail question [“Are People in Hell Isolated and Alone?”](#) The bible clearly states that the wages of sin is DEATH not eternal life, be it in heaven or hell as you think. Malachi 4:3 plainly says they shall be ashes under our feet. In Is.1:28 “...and they that forsake the Lord shall be consumed.” Is.66:17 says “...shall be consumed together, saith the Lord.” Rev 20:9 “...and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them.” Rev 20:14 “And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.” Doesn’t say second life but second death. You should look up some of the Greek and Hebrew words that have been translated into hell, that would make it more clear to you.

Thank you for your letter. You are correct in noting that the fate of unbelievers is one of heated debate these days, even among professing evangelicals. My own difficulty with the thesis of conditional immortality stems from passages like Matthew 25:46, Revelation 14:9-11 and Revelation 20:10. It is difficult for me to see how these passages can be consistent with the denial of eternal punishment.

For example, in Matthew 25:46 Jesus states: “And these will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same Greek term, *aionion* (eternal), is used to describe both punishment and life.

Revelation 14:11 reads in part: “And the smoke from their torture will go up forever and ever, and those who worship the beast and his image will have no rest day or night.” What troubles me about this verse is the concluding phrase, “those who worship the beast and his image will have no rest day or night.” Again, these unfortunate people appear to be enduring eternal, conscious torment.

Finally, in Revelation 20:10 we read: "And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever." The beast and false prophet are both human beings. And yet, along with the devil, they will endure eternal punishment. Furthermore, Revelation 19:20 states, "Now the beast was seized, and along with him the false prophet who had performed the signs on his behalf—signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. Both of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulfur." Please note that this takes place prior to the thousand year reign of Christ (Revelation 20:1-7). And yet, when the thousand years are over, the beast and false prophet are still being tormented in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). This lake of fire is the same place where all unbelievers are thrown in Revelation 20:15.

It's true that this is called the "second death," but does the Bible equate "death" with "annihilation"? How do you read Ephesians 2:1-2? The Ephesians were formerly "dead." But does this mean that they didn't have personal, conscious existence? Wouldn't you agree that the Ephesians were spiritually dead (i.e. separated from the spiritual life of God)? And might this not also be what the Bible means by the "second death" (i.e. unremedied spiritual death results in eternal separation from God)? When the Bible speaks of death it does not mean "annihilation." Rather, it means "separation."

Physical death is the "separation" of the spirit from the body (James 2:26). Spiritual death is the "separation" of a conscious, living person from God (Ephesians 2:1-2). And the second death is the "eternal separation" of an unredeemed person from God (Revelation 20:11-15).

This, at any rate, is why it's so difficult for me to embrace the doctrines of conditional immortality and annihilationism.

Hope this helps.

The Lord bless you,

Michael Gleghorn

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## **“How was Salvation Achieved Before Christ?”**

**How was salvation achieved prior to the Resurrection of Christ and the spreading of Christianity?**

Salvation has always been a gift of God's grace, received by faith alone. While today believers look back to the death and resurrection of Christ as that which makes God's gift of salvation possible, before the time of Christ believers looked forward to the coming of a Savior. This Savior, or Deliverer, would be of the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), the seed of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; Gen. 15:6), and the seed of David (2 Sam. 7:12-17; see also Matt. 1:1-17). He was prefigured in the Passover (Exod. 12), the offerings in Leviticus 1-5, the Tabernacle, and the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), just to name a few. Furthermore, He was prophesied by Isaiah, Micah, and many others. Thus, before the coming of Christ, the **CONTENT** of saving faith (i.e. what someone was to believe in order to be saved) may have been somewhat different (depending on the extent of God's revelation to that point in history), but the **OBJECT** of saving faith has always been God and His faithful promises revealed in Scripture. This is why Paul is able to hold up Abraham as a model of faith for the first century

Christians in Rome (see Romans 4). As Paul points out, all the way back in Gen. 15:6 we read of Abraham, "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." In other words, Abraham was saved by grace, through faith, just as we are today.

God bless you,

Michael Gleghorn

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## **Why Didn't God Communicate to Us More Clearly?**

**Why is there so much confusion among believers and denominations? Why didn't God state everything in a simple, abridged manner to avoid this cluster of contradictory interpretations? This not only relates to young earth vs old earth, but on hundreds of doctrinal topics.**

Thanks for your letter. You ask a very good question: "Why didn't God state everything in a simple, abridged manner to avoid this cluster of contradictory interpretations?"

Let me attempt to provide some possible options to consider. Before doing so, however, I must honestly admit that I do not know (with any certainty) why God did things the way He did. The only way I could know this would be if God had told me. And He hasn't. However, He may have given us some clues in the Bible itself.

First, I think we should always bear in mind that MOST of the Bible is readily comprehensible when read carefully. To be

sure, there are "some things hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16), but much of the Bible (when read carefully) is readily understandable.

Second, sometimes man's difficulty with biblical interpretation stems from sinfulness and a strong motivation not to WANT to understand what the text says. This, I think, is why Jesus sometimes spoke in parables. Parables revealed spiritual truth to those open to receive it, but hid the truth from those who rejected Jesus and His message. Along these lines, note in particular Jesus' statement in Matthew 13:10-17-

And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

"For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.

"Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

"In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'

"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

"For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

(See also Isaiah 6:9-10; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:16-18; etc.). Thus, some of the difficulty with understanding God's word comes from man's sinfulness, hard-heartedness, and unbelief.

Finally, with those passages which are really difficult, and about which very good Christian scholars differ, I think we have a motivation to dig deeper into God's word, to study more diligently, to seek His meaning more carefully and prayerfully. By agonizing over difficulties, many Christians have gained a very deep knowledge of the Scriptures.

These are at least some POSSIBLE reasons why God's word is sometimes difficult to understand. I hope they help at least a little bit.

The Lord bless you,

Michael Gleghorn  
Probe Ministries

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## **“What is the New Covenant?”**

### **What is the New Covenant?**

The primary Old Testament passage pertaining to the New Covenant is Jeremiah 31:31-34. In this wonderful passage God promises to make a New Covenant with His people (v. 31), a covenant unlike the Mosaic covenant (v. 32). Under this New Covenant, God promises to write His laws on the hearts of His people (v. 33), to have intimate communion with them (vv. 33-34), and to forgive their sins (v. 34).

This New Covenant was inaugurated in the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. On the night of His betrayal and arrest, Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples. During the

course of this meal He told them, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20).

In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews has a great deal to say about this New Covenant. In an article on "Covenant," Trent Butler describes some of the special features of the New Covenant as related in the book of Hebrews :

"The emphasis is on Jesus, the perfect High Priest, providing a new, better, superior covenant (Heb. 7:22; 8:6). Jesus represented the fulfillment of Jeremiah's new covenant promise (Heb. 8:8, 10; 10:16). Jesus was the perfect covenant Mediator (Heb. 9:15), providing an eternal inheritance in a way the old covenant could not (compare 12:24). Jesus' death on the cross satisfied the requirement that all covenants be established by blood (Heb. 9:18, 20) just as was the first covenant (Ex. 24:8). Christ's blood established an everlasting covenant (Heb. 13:20)" (*Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 312).

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## **"Did the Girl Raised from the Dead Get a Second Chance for Salvation?"**

How do you explain the situation represented in Matthew 9:18-25, of the little girl being raised after dying?

*While He was saying these things to them, a synagogue official came and bowed down before Him, and said, "My*

*daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.” Jesus got up and {began} to follow him, and so did His disciples. And a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch His garment, I will get well.” But Jesus turning and seeing her said, “Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.” At once the woman was made well. When Jesus came into the official’s house, and saw the flute-players and the crowd in noisy disorder, He said, “Leave; for the girl has not died, but is asleep.” And they began laughing at Him. But when the crowd had been sent out, He entered and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.*

**My question is this: If if she was unsaved, did this girl get a second chance at salvation? If yes, how does this fit in with knowing that “it is appointed for man once to die and after this the judgment”? Secondly, if she was saved, was she allowed to share about the glory of heaven? If not saved, how could she be brought back from Hell?**

You ask some interesting and important questions, but I’m honestly not sure that either I, or anyone else, can give you any definitive answers. I will say that the doctrine of a second chance is almost always understood in the sense of a “second chance” for salvation AFTER death (sometimes even after judgment), but PRIOR to the eternal state (which is, by definition, both permanent and eternal). Thus, strictly speaking, the case of the little girl in Matthew 9 may not have any direct relevance to this doctrine. This is at least highly probable for three very good reasons:

1. Scripture nowhere clearly affirms the doctrine of a second chance for salvation after death.
2. The little girl’s death was only temporary. The Father knew all along that His Son would shortly raise her.
3. The little girl did not go before God for final judgment



at this time.

The doctrine of the “intermediate state” (i.e. between death and resurrection) is debated among theologians. Most evangelicals believe that after death the immaterial part of a person goes either to a temporary place of punishment called Hades, or a temporary place of peace in the presence of the Lord called Paradise (see Luke 16:19-31; 23:43). After the resurrection and final judgment the entire person will then go to their eternal destiny (either the Lake of Fire or the new heavens and the new earth – See Revelation 20:11-21:8). Since this little girl did not enter her eternal destiny, she could not have shared about Heaven or Hell as we commonly think of them. But could she have shared about either Hades or Paradise?

The difficulty with answering such questions is twofold: 1. The Bible simply doesn't tell us whether or not the girl was saved, nor what her conscious experience (if any) was like between physical death and resuscitation. Thus, anyone trying to answer such questions will be speculating with no clear Scriptural support for this special event. 2. The case is clearly an exceptional one and thus, by definition, does not fit within the general doctrine of what happens to a person after death. Most people who die are not subsequently brought back to a natural mode of physical human existence in this world. The case is an exception, and therefore will not necessarily fit all the rules. Needless to say, the Father knew (even before the little girl died) that His Son would raise her from the dead. Therefore, the usual things which happen to a person after death need not necessarily apply in this case. The Lord had no intention that she remain dead at that time! And finally, after restoring the little girl to life, we simply aren't told whether she was allowed to share her experiences between death and resuscitation, whether or not she had any conscious experiences at all to share, or if she did, whether or not she even remembered them.

My own opinion is that, as Christians, we have an ethical obligation to honestly tell people when we've run up against the limits of our knowledge. Thus, in explaining this passage to someone, I would say much of what I've said above, but I would honestly tell them that the Bible doesn't always satisfy our curiosity about such matters. Sometimes the questions we bring to the Bible simply aren't answered there. In such cases, we must humbly confess our ignorance and rest in the knowledge of God's omniscience. God knows the whole, whereas we know only a part.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn  
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## **“Did the OT Jews Expect a Divine Messiah?”**

Did the Jews, prior to Jesus, expect the Messiah to be divine, i.e. God Himself? Everything I can find seems to indicate that they expected him to be divinely appointed, divinely empowered, with divine authority, with kingly authority and priestly authority but I don't see that necessarily the same as God Himself. Two passages could result in that expectation perhaps: Psalm 110:1 and Isa 7:14.

I was wondering this because of the people's response to Jesus, especially as He started to make clear His divine association with God the Father.

You ask a great question. It does not appear that the Jewish people anticipated a truly divine Messiah. Messiah means

“anointed one” – and the Jewish people did see such people as being closely connected with God in some way (e.g. as a representative of God, empowered by His Spirit, etc.).

Over time, the Jewish concept of Messiah evolved to include a royal, prophetic, and priestly function. In the intertestamental period, particularly in the Psalms of Solomon, Messiah is regarded as a warrior-prince who would throw off the yoke of Rome and establish a Jewish kingdom. This is probably why Jesus is sometimes reluctant to identify himself as the Messiah in the Gospels.

However, when one reads the OT Messianic texts (like Ps. 110; etc.) in light of NT teachings, it becomes clear that it is quite possible to understand the OT conception of Messiah as being both human and divine. It may not have been clear to the OT Jewish people, but it does become clear in light of NT revelation. Indeed, I think Jesus makes this very point about Ps. 110 in Matt. 22:41-46.

Hope this helps a bit.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn

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## **“Why Did God Create the World Knowing Jesus Would Die?”**

I would like to know why God would create the world, when He knew in advance that man would sin and Jesus would have to die. I know that God created the world for a relationship with

us, and for His glory. It just seems awfully selfish for Him to create a world in which His own Son would have to suffer and die. Was it God the Son on the cross, or God the Father, too, through the Trinity? I have struggled with this question for so long.

You are correct in your observation that God knew, even prior to creating the world, that man would sin. The Father also planned to send His Son as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. As far as I know, the Bible does not explicitly tell us why God chose to create the world as He did. However, since the Bible does tell us that God is perfectly good and wise, I think we are safe in assuming that God had good and wise reasons for doing things this way. We can only speculate on what those reasons might have been. But ultimately, we have to rest in the morally perfect character of God, trusting in His goodness and wisdom.

However, I believe I would take exception with your statement, "It just seems awfully selfish for Him to create a world in which His own Son would have to suffer and die." Let me make a few observations and comments about this. First, God the Son was also involved in creation (John 1:1-3; etc.). Second, God the Son was a willing participant in the plan of redemption. The Father and Son do not will different things. They are in perfect agreement with one another. Third, I would argue that this is about the most UNselfish thing the Father could possibly do. The Father loves the Son. What could possibly be selfish about His freely giving His own Son as a redemptive sacrifice for the sins of the world? And the Bible is clear about His motive and reason for doing this. It was love (John 3:16).

Finally, it was God the Son incarnate as the Man Jesus who died on the cross. The Father did NOT die on the cross. Many people in our churches today are quite confused on this issue. One often hears prayers in which the person thanks the Father for dying on the cross. This is incorrect. The Son became

incarnate and died for our sins, according to the will of His heavenly Father (which He certainly was in agreement with).

The Lord bless you,

Michael Gleghorn

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## **“How Does Christians’ Singing Hallelujah Differ From Hindu Chanting?”**

In discussing chanting with a Hindu, I stumbled when he pointed out that we Christians also repeat God’s name when we sing “Hallelujah, hallelujah....” So are we repeating vainly? Of course not. If we are praising God, he claimed, so are they.

How can I make my point against chanting but still justify our glorification of God singing “Hallelujah”? Also he pointed out that they are praising God like we also praise God in Psalms.

It seems to me that a few points can be made to distinguish what Christians are doing from what Hare Krishnas and other Hindus are doing.

1. “Hallelujah” comes from two Hebrew words meaning “Praise the Lord” (i.e. *Hallelu Yah*). When we say Hallelujah, we are praising the Lord. This seems different from simply repeating the name of a particular god over and over. We are praising the Lord, not simply repeating His Name.

2. Although this may not be true for all of those engaged in repetitive chanting of the name of a god, nevertheless, for

many of these people such chanting is intended to focus the mind and help induce an altered state of consciousness in which one “realizes” that “All is One,” “All is God,” “I Am God,” etc. This, of course, is not what Christians are trying to achieve when they praise the Lord. Thus, the intentions of Christians in praising the Lord are very different from the intentions of some Hindus in repeating the name of a god.

3. Hindus and Christians typically have very different conceptions of “God.” Even if we both refer to the Supreme Being as “God,” we mean something very different by this term. Hindus are typically pantheists or polytheists; Christians are monotheists. Thus, we have very different ideas or definitions about what (or who) “God” is.

These three differences, at least in my opinion, make it very difficult to equate what Christians are doing when we praise the Lord with what Hindus are doing when they engage in the repetitive chanting of a god’s name.

The Lord bless and keep you!

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn  
Probe Ministries

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## **“How Do I Witness About the New Age Movement?”**

**How do I witness about the New Age movement with firm intelligence but empathy?**

There are a number of helpful books available which set forth

a Christian response to the New Age Movement. I will recommend a few resources you might want to consider, but the bibliographies in most of these will direct you to many further resources as well.

1. *Embraced by the Darkness: Exposing New Age Theology from the Inside Out* by Brad Scott (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996). Brad spent ten years involved in the New Age religion until converting to Christianity. He teaches at Golden Gate University.

2. *Confronting the New Age and Unmasking the New Age* by Douglas Groothuis (InterVarsity Press). Doug teaches at Denver Seminary.

3. *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview* by John Newport (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). This looks like a comprehensive resource by a distinguished professor of Philosophy of Religion at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

4. *Apologetics in the New Age: A Christian Critique of Pantheism* by David Clark and Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990).

5. *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* by John Ankerberg and John Weldon (Oregon: Harvest House, 1996).

6. I would also recommend checking out Marcia Montenegro's website at [www.christiananswersforthenewage.org](http://www.christiananswersforthenewage.org). Marcia was a former astrologer who was deeply involved in the New Age Movement prior to her conversion to Christianity. She has many helpful articles on her site. CANA stands for Christian Answers for the New Age. Please be sure to check out her site.

Finally, there is a brief [article on the New Age Movement by Kerby Anderson](#) on the Probe website. In addition, there are many other related articles in our ["Cults and World Religions"](#) section on our Web site at [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).

A careful study of some of these resources, combined with prayer and compassion for those you seek to reach, will be of great benefit to you as you seek to share Christ with those you love.

Best wishes in witnessing for Him,

Michael Gleghorn  
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## Evaluating Miracle Claims

*Probe's Michael Gleghorn demonstrates that not all miracle claims are equal. Although genuine miracles have occurred, a careful evaluation reveals that many claims are spurious.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



### Are They Alien Events?

I recently spoke with a Christian woman who told me of the concern she felt for many of her family members who had embraced the doctrines of Christian Science. As we discussed how she might effectively communicate the gospel to those she loved, she mentioned one of the main difficulties she faced in getting a fair hearing. Apparently, some of her family members had been surprisingly healed of various physical ailments. And naturally enough, they interpreted these healings as confirming the truth of Christian Science.

What are we, as Christians, to make of such claims? Are they miracles? What are we to think about the many sincere people, holding vastly different beliefs, who claim to have personally experienced miracles? And what about many of the world's great



religious traditions that claim support for their doctrines, at least in part, by an appeal to the miraculous? Should we assume that all such claims are false and that only Christian miracle claims are true? Or might some miracles have actually occurred outside a Judeo-Christian context? Are there any criteria we can apply in evaluating miracle claims to help us determine whether or not a miracle has actually occurred? And could there be other ways of explaining such claims besides recourse to the miraculous?

Before we attempt to answer such questions, we must first agree on what a "miracle" is. Although various definitions have been used in the past, we will rely on a definition given by Richard Purtill. "A miracle is an event brought about by the power of God that is a temporary exception to the ordinary course of nature for the purpose of showing that God has acted in history."[\[1\]](#) A miracle, then, requires a personal, supernatural being who is capable of intervening in nature to bring about an effect that would otherwise not have occurred.

If this is what miracles are, then some religions have no real way of accounting for them. Take Christian Science for instance. "The Christian Science view of God is impersonal and *pantheistic*."[\[2\]](#) In this system, "miracles" can be nothing more than "divinely natural" events.[\[3\]](#) But if a true miracle requires the intervention of a personal being who is beyond nature, then Christian Science has no place for such events because it does not admit the existence of such a being. As David Clark has stated: "Pantheism has no category labeled 'free act by a divine person.' So miracles are as alien to all forms of pantheism as they are to atheism."[\[4\]](#) Thus, far from demonstrating the truth of Christian Science, a genuine miracle would actually demonstrate its falsity! While such events may still have occurred, they can hardly be used as evidence in support of such traditions

## Are They Legendary Events?

Apollonius of Tyana was, like Jesus, a traveling first century teacher. Like Jesus, he is credited with having performed a variety of miraculous feats. He is said to have healed the sick, cast out demons and predicted the future. He is even said to have raised the dead!

In a fascinating passage from his biography we read the following:

A girl had died...and the whole of Rome was mourning...Apollonius...witnessing their grief, said: 'Put down the bier, for I will stay the tears that you are shedding for this maiden'...The crowd...thought that he was about to deliver...an oration...but merely touching her and whispering in secret some spell over her, at once woke up the maiden from her seeming death..."[\[5\]](#)

Readers familiar with the Gospel of Luke will recognize that this story is quite similar to the account of Jesus raising the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). But isn't it inconsistent for Christians to affirm that Jesus really did perform such a miracle while denying the same for Apollonius? Not necessarily.

Suppose that the story about Apollonius is merely legendary, while the story about Jesus is truly historical. If that were so, then it would clearly make sense for Christians to deny that Apollonius raised someone from the dead while simultaneously affirming that Jesus really did perform such a feat. There are actually good reasons for believing that this is in fact the case.

Norman Geisler draws a number of significant contrasts between the evidence for Jesus and that for Apollonius.[\[6\]](#) First, the only source we have for the life of Apollonius comes from Philostratus. In contrast, we have numerous, independent

sources of information about the life of Jesus. These include the four canonical gospels, many New Testament letters, and even extra-biblical references in writers like Tacitus, Josephus and others. Second, Philostratus wrote his biography about 120 years after Apollonius' death. The New Testament was written by those who were contemporaries and/or eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus. The point, of course, is that the further one gets from the original events, the more likely it is that accounts may become contaminated by later legendary developments. Third, Philostratus was commissioned to write his work by the wife of a Roman emperor, most likely as a means of countering the growing influence of Christianity. He thus had a motivation to embellish his account and make Apollonius appear to be the equal of Jesus. The New Testament writers, however, had no such motivation for embellishing the life of Jesus. Finally, Philostratus admits that the girl Apollonius allegedly raised may not have even been dead! [\[7\]](#) Luke, however, is quite clear that the widow's son was dead when Jesus raised him.

This brief comparison reveals that not all miracle claims are as historically well-attested as those of Jesus.

## **Are They Psychosomatic Events?**

Amazing healings are among the most frequently cited miracle claims. Although many of these claims may be false, many are also true. But are they really miracles?

Some estimates indicate that up to 80 percent of disease is stress related. While such diseases are real, and really do afflict the body, they originate largely from negative mental attitudes, anxiety and other unhealthy emotions. For this reason, such diseases can often be healed through a reduction in stress, combined with positive mental attitudes and healthy emotions. But such healings should not be viewed as miracles because they do not involve God's direct, supernatural intervention.

If this is true, then we must carefully distinguish between psychosomatic events and those that are truly miraculous. Psychosomatic illnesses have psychological or emotional (rather than physiological) causes. Thus, people afflicted with such disorders may get better simply by coming to believe that they *can* get better. In other words, psychosomatic disorders can often be alleviated simply by faith—whether in God, a priest, a doctor, a pill, or a particular method of treatment. But there is nothing miraculous about this kind of healing. “It happens to Buddhists, Hindus, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and atheists. Healers claiming supernatural powers can do it, but so can...psychiatrists by purely natural powers...”<sup>{9}</sup> Obviously, healings of this sort cannot be used as evidence for a particular belief system because all belief systems can account for them.

But are there any differences between supernatural and psychological healings that might help us decide whether or not a particular healing was truly miraculous? Norman Geisler lists a number of important distinctions.<sup>{10}</sup> First, supernatural healings do not require personal contact. Jesus occasionally healed people from a distance (John 4:46-54). In contrast, psychological healings often do require such contact, even if this simply involves laying one’s hands on the television while an alleged faith-healer prays. Second, when a person is healed supernaturally there are no relapses. But relapses are common after psychological healings. Finally, a person can be healed of *any* condition by supernatural means, including organic diseases and major birth defects. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-5) and restored the sight of one born blind (John 9). In contrast, not all conditions can be healed psychologically. Such methods are usually effective only in treating psychosomatic illnesses.

Thus, not every claim for miraculous healing is a genuine miracle. Only those healings that offer clear evidence of Divine intervention can fairly be considered miracles.

## Are They Deceptive Events?

It appeared to be a miracle. The young man claimed he could see without an eye! Norman Geisler recounts an amazing demonstration he once witnessed in a seminary chapel back in the early 70s.[{11}](#) It involved a young man who had injured his left eye as a child. It was later surgically removed and replaced with a glass eye. For three years his father prayed, asking God to restore his son's vision. One day, his son excitedly announced that he could see with his glass eye! His father believed that God had worked a miracle. And apparently he wasn't the only one.

At the chapel service the young man's father shared how the physicians who had examined his son had confirmed that his vision had been restored despite the removal of the young man's eye! The demonstration seemed to prove that this was indeed the case. The young man's glass eye was removed and his good eye was covered with a blindfold that had been inspected by one of the students in the audience. After various items had been randomly collected from those in attendance, the young man proceeded to read what was written on them! Needless to say, all who witnessed the performance were stunned by what appeared to be a genuine miracle. But was there another explanation? Although he initially thought that he had witnessed a miracle, Dr. Geisler later came to believe that he might have been deceived. But why?

It turns out that any skilled performer of magic tricks can do the very same thing. By applying some invisible lubricant to the cheek before a performance begins, the magician can have coins and clay placed over his eyes, along with a blindfold, and still read what has been handed to him. How is this possible? Dr. Geisler explains: "By lifting his forehead under the bandages, a small gap is made down the bridge of his nose through which he can see. It is not a miracle; it is magic."[{12}](#)

Since magic can often appear miraculous, we must carefully

evaluate miracle claims for clear evidence of divine intervention. What are some differences between miracles and magic that may keep us from being deceived?[{13}](#)

First, miracles are of God and serve to glorify God. Magic is of man and usually serves to glorify the magician. Second, no deception is involved in miracles. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he was really dead, and had been for four days (John 11:39). But deception is an essential component of human magic. Finally, a miracle fits into nature in a way that magic does not. When Jesus healed the man born blind (John 9), He restored the proper function of his natural eyes. By contrast, in the story above the young man claimed to see without an eye at all! While one is clearly of God, the other is simply odd.

## **Are They Demonic Events?**

The Bible affirms the existence of both Satan and demons, evil spirit beings with personal attributes who are united in their opposition to God and His plans for the world. Although vastly inferior to God, they still possess immense intelligence and power. Is it possible that at least some of the apparently miraculous phenomena reported in the world's religions and the occult might be due to demonic spirits?

The book of Exodus seems to indicate that the Egyptian magicians were able to duplicate the first two plagues that God brought upon their land (Exod. 7:22; 8:7). How should this be explained? While some believe the magicians relied on human trickery,[{14}](#) others think that demonic spirits may have aided them.[{15}](#)

Although we cannot know for sure which view is correct, the demonic hypothesis is certainly possible. Indeed, the Bible elsewhere explicitly affirms the power of Satan and demons to perform amazing feats. For instance, Luke tells of a slave-girl "having a spirit of divination...who was bringing her masters much profit by fortunetelling" (Acts 16:16).

Undoubtedly this was a demonic spirit for Luke records that Paul cast it out “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:18). This enraged the girl’s masters because apparently, once the demon had been exorcised, the girl no longer retained her special powers (Acts 16:19).

In addition, Paul told the Thessalonians that the coming of the end-time ruler would be in “accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9). In Revelation 13 we read that Satan gives his power and authority to this wicked ruler, apparently even healing his otherwise fatal wound to the head (Rev. 13:3). Not only this, but the ruler’s assistant is also said to perform “great signs” (v. 13). For instance, he is said to make fire come down from heaven and to give breath and the power of speech to an image of the ruler (vv. 13-15). The text implies that these wonders are accomplished through the power of Satan (v. 2).

This brief survey indicates that Satan and demonic spirits can indeed perform false signs and wonders that may initially appear to rival even genuinely Divine miracles. The book of Revelation tells us that the world of unregenerate humanity, deceived by such amazing signs, proceeds to worship both Satan and the ruler (Rev. 13:4). But how can we, as Christians, keep from being likewise deceived? In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul exhorts believers to put on “the full armor of God.” Among other things, this involves taking up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (see Eph. 6:10-17). If we have faith in Christ Jesus, and if we are protected by “the full armor of God,” we won’t be easily deceived by “the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).

## **Notes**

1. Richard L. Purtill, “Defining Miracles,” in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Action in History*,

- eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 72.
2. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1990), 111.
  3. Norman L. Geisler, in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, s.v. "Miracles, Magic and," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 476.
  4. David K. Clark, "Miracles in the World Religions," in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 203.
  5. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F.C. Conybeare (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1912 [Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1]), 457-459, cited in Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 83.
  6. Norman L. Geisler, in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, s.v., "Apollonius of Tyana," 44-45.
  7. See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 85.
  8. Kenneth Pelletier, *Christian Medical Society Journal* 11, no. 1 (1980), cited in Geisler, "Healings, Psychosomatic," *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 301.
  9. Norman L. Geisler, "Apollonius of Tyana," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 44-45.
  10. *Ibid.*, 118-122.
  11. The story is told in Norman Geisler, *Signs and Wonders* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988), 59-60.
  12. *Ibid.*, 60.
  13. I take these criteria from Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*, 73-76.



14. See Dan Korem, *Powers: Testing the Psychic and Supernatural* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 172-176.

15. See John D. Hannah, "Exodus," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 118.

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