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…"[9] 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.{10} 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 seeIt 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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Miracles

Miracles: What Are They?

Have you noticed how often the word *miracle* is used these days? Skin creams that make us look younger; computer technology; the transition of a nation from oppression to freedom; what a quarterback needs to pull off for his team to have a winning season. All these are called *miracles* today. Anything that takes extreme effort or which amazes people is now a miracle. I'm still amazed that airplanes stay in the air. But is that a *miracle*?

To begin our discussion we'll first put forth a definition. To clarify the nature of a miracle will also require making distinctions in God's activities in creation. Then we'll respond to objections to the possibility of miracles. Finally, we'll consider their apologetic use.

So, what is a miracle? In his book, *All the Miracles of the Bible,* Herbert Lockyer said that a miracle is "some extraordinary work of deity transcending the ordinary powers of nature and wrought in connection with the ends of revelation."{1} Notice the three elements: miracles are supernatural, or the work of deity; they transcend or override natural law; and they are part of God's means of revealing His nature and purposes to us.

In Acts. 2:22, Peter speaks of the "miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through" Jesus. This reference to *miracles* can also be translated *power*. Miracles demonstrate the supernatural power of God over nature and evil forces. This power was seen in Jesus' healing the sick; calming the storm; and raising people from the dead. Such events occurred in opposition to the normal course of nature; they could only be done by a supernatural power.

The word *wonders* refers to the response the miracles evoked in the observers, a response of astonishment and fear. Observers knew they had seen something out of the ordinary, something that in its greatness could even be threatening to them.

Still a third word used by Peter in Acts 2:22 points to the revelatory purpose of miracles. There, Peter referred to the *signs* of Jesus. This word stresses that aspect of miracles which draws attention to the significance of the event. Signs point to or reveal something else.

First, they indicated a relationship between the miracle worker and God. In John 5:36 Jesus said that his works were evidence that he had been sent by God. Second, they pointed to a fuller activity of God still to come. As one writer said: "The power Jesus exhibited was a foretaste of the power to be revealed at the end of the age."{2}

Also, miracles are revelatory themselves in that they reveal the nature of God. Jesus came to reveal the Father to us. He *said* he was the Savior, and he *showed* he was the Savior by doing saving things. He healed diseases; he delivered the demon-possessed; he saved from the fury of the storm.

So, miracles are from God; they override nature; and they reveal God. They aren't simply amazing events. When just about *anything* amazing is called a miracle simply *because* it's amazing, real miracles lose their significance.

Miracles and Providence

The word *miracle* is used so often and to describe so many things that it's lost its power. One of the reasons events are called miracles which shouldn't be—at least by Christians—is that we want to give due honor to God for His work in our lives. This is how it should be. However, in order to give miracles their due, we should distinguish the different kinds of activity of God in this world.

We can think of God's involvement in three categories. First, what we call *providence,* which is God's ongoing work in sustaining the universe He created and the people in it. He keeps the stars in place; He provides for our physical needs; and He is active in the governing of societies. People have come to learn that things work a certain way, whether they are believers in God or not. No explicit belief in God is necessary to explain such things. Events on this level are not miracles.

Second, God is active in what we might call *special providence*. "Special providences," said theologian Louis Berkhof, "are special combinations in the order of events, as in the answer to prayer, in deliverance out of trouble, and in all instances in which grace and help come in critical circumstances."{3} God's hand is "visible" in a sense to Christians who have watched all the pieces to one or more of life's puzzles fall into place in a very special way.

Our move to Texas to work with Probe is an example. When we survey all the events that led up to our move, we recognize that God had to have been involved. But that's because we set these events in the context of the thinking, the decisions, and the prayers of people who sought God's will. However, people who aren't inclined to see God working in our lives would see nothing supernatural about such events. They might simply see that we made a decision to move, the leadership of Probe and our church concurred, and a bunch of other people who support us agreed. Is this type of occurrence a miracle? In my opinion it isn't. Although God was involved in a special way, the laws of nature weren't transcended.

The third category of God's involvement is *miracles* that we defined earlier as events, which are supernatural in origin, transcend or violate natural laws, and serve a revelatory function in God's redemptive work. Here the hand of God is clearly visible to anyone who doesn't deliberately refuse to believe. The event is contrary to the normal course of nature;

no scientific explanation is possible. Of a purported miracle, we might ask this question: Is it impossible that the event could have taken place without God's special intervention to alter the inevitable course of nature?

These three categories are not rigidly divided. They form more of a continuum. The distinguishing mark is the visibility of God's hand in a given event. Is He in the background, simply maintaining His created order? Or has He manipulated certain events to a certain end without making His presence clearly seen by all? Or has He acted so powerfully in the realm of nature that there is no other reasonable explanation?

The purpose of such considerations is that we might not use the word *miracle* too lightly. To accomplish their role, miracles must remain distinct from that which is simply amazing.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and Natural Law

Miracles have come under attack for centuries now. In short, objectors seem to assume that *our* lives' experience is normative. With respect to *environment*, it is assumed that what we see in nature is all there is or can be. With respect to *time,* also, critics say that our experience *today* determines what could have happened *yesterday*, or that our limitations do not allow us to know what happened in the past. Let's consider first the question of nature, and then at the problem of historical knowledge with respect to miracles.

Miracles came under heavy attack during the Enlightenment by deists and atheists, and later by liberal churchmen. In the heady days of the rise of science, many came to see miracles as violations of natural law. To the rationalists of that day, such a violation was an impossibility. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, put it this way: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable

experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."{4}

This raises two questions. First, are natural laws inviolable? Second, how do we interpret the evidence?

First, the question of natural law. Some critics believe simply that there is no power higher than nature and thus no power that could supersede the laws of nature. This is naturalism, a philosophical belief that can't itself be proved by what is seen in nature. This is a philosophical assumption, and we shouldn't be put off by it. We believe that God exists, and being the creator of the natural laws, He is above them Himself and able to alter them. They don't. To undermine the possibility of miracles, naturalists must prove there is no God to perform them. On the other hand, if we can show that non-natural events *did* or *have* occurred, the naturalist will have to find some explanation in his worldview for them.

Other critics may not argue from an atheistic standpoint, but they hold that a universe in which natural laws can be broken is inherently unstable. If miracles occurred, all would be chaos. We answer that if God is powerful enough to create nature and to override its laws, He is also powerful enough to keep the rest of nature in order.

Thus, the reality of natural law is no deterrent to miracles.

Second, how do we weigh the evidence for and against miracles? What about Hume's objection that there is more evidence *against* miracles than *for* them? First, the abundant evidence of order at most suggests that miracles are the rare exception. But this is what makes them so significant! Consider, too, that the proper use of evidences includes being open to new evidences, including those of unusual occurrences. Second, evidences should be *weighed*, not just *counted*. So, to illustrate, we are more likely to accept the testimony of one

person known for honesty and integrity over the evidence of five known liars. The quality of the evidence is what counts.

As I noted earlier, arguments against miracles based upon the workings of nature typically reveal an underlying philosophy of naturalism. But there is another kind of objection to miracles. That is, that history can't bear the weight of proving miracles occurred in the past. We'll turn our attention to that objection next.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and History

We have looked briefly at David Hume's argument against miracles based on natural law. On the surface, Hume's argument was against *proving* a miracle, not against the *reality* of miracles *per se*. His main point was that we can't *know* whether a miracle occurred because our knowledge is gleaned from evidences, and the preponderance of evidence is always *for* natural law and *against* miracles. He believed that it would be more likely, that, for example, all the witnesses *lied* than that a person was raised from the dead. How was Hume so sure of this? "Because," he said, 'that has never been observed in any age or country."{5} So, when someone *said* they *saw* a miracle, Hume said they were deluded or were lying because no one's ever seen a miracle! It seems clear that Hume's argument against *knowing* whether a miracle occurred was based upon his prior *conviction* that miracles don't occur.

Of course, if no evidence could be sufficient to prove miracles in the present, records of miracles in history were surely faulty. If we don't experience miracles today, Hume thought, there's no reason to think others did in the past.

Anthony Flew, a contemporary philosopher, has built on Hume's argument. He says there must be uniformity between the present (the time of the historian) and the past (when the event took place) to make any reasonable interpretation of the past. This

is called the *rule of analogy*. The regularities of nature are part of our present experience, and we must assume they were the experience of people in the past.

This argument presupposes that there are no miracles occurring now. How do critics know this? Either they must be omniscient, or they must begin with a naturalistic worldview which by definition precludes miracles. One also wonders how Flew could accept *any* unique, singular event in history, such as the origins of the universe and of life, if regularity is a requirement for historical knowledge.

Other critics say the problem is with the study of history *per se*. They argue that historical knowledge is too subjective for us to know what really happened in the past. Our own values, worldviews and prejudices color our understanding so that there aren't any historically objective facts. But if this is so, the critic's own judgment about historical knowledge is too colored by his own values, etc., to be taken as objective fact. As philosopher Frances Beckwith notes, this also means that no interpretation of history can be considered bad, and that there is no reason to revise history (except perhaps for the historian's amusement).{6}

It would seem that those who deny miracles are typically predisposed against them. If this is the case, is there any apologetic use for miracles? Let's look at this next.

The Apologetic Use of Miracles

"Miracle was once the foundation of all apologetics, then it became an apologetic crutch, and today it is not infrequently regarded as a cross for apologetics to bear." So said a German theologian in the early part of this century.{7} While it's true that evidential apologetics emphasizes the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, miracles in general play little role in apologetics today.

What's the proper role of miracles in apologetics? First, of course, Christians need to answer the charge that miracles can't happen, and that the Bible, therefore, isn't true. Miracles are an integral part of Christianity; to side-step objections to them by downplaying their role is to abandon the cause.

But what about persuasion? In Scripture, were miracles used as evidence to persuade unbelievers?

We see in the New Testament that miracles *did* serve as evidence and they brought some people to belief. When Jesus raised Lazarus "many of the Jews . . . put their faith in Him" (Jn.11:45; see also Acts 2:22-41; 5:12-16; 6:7,8; 8:6-8; Rom. 15:18,19). But note that some went to the Pharisees and ratted on Jesus.At other times Jesus chastised the Pharisees because they believed neither His words nor His works (Jn.10:22-32; 15:24). Not everyone believed in response to miracles (cf. Acts 14:3,4).

Remember that Jesus didn't do miracles for people who had no faith-such as the people in His hometown (Matt. 13:58)—or for those who insisted that He prove Himself to them-such as the Jewish leaders (Matt. 16:1-4). When He ministered in His hometown, for instance, people took offense at Him, and Matthew says, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith". Matthew also reports that Jesus refused the Jewish leaders when they came to Him "and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven" (16:1-4)

No, Jesus' miracles were done in response to faith. But this wasn't necessarily explicit faith in Jesus as Savior. It could have been simply the openness to God of people who were willing to hear. By doing miracles, Jesus identified himself as the Messiah who had been prophesied.{8} People either recognized the fulfillment of prophecy or simply recognized the hand of God, or both.

Someone might ask, even if people won't accept miracles, might they not respond to the simple preaching of the cross? Remember that miracles were part of God's revelation of His redemptive activity. They were set in the context of the spoken message of Jesus. People who refused the spoken word also refused to accept the evidence of miracles. As Abraham said to the rich man in Jesus' parable, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Lk.16:31)

Thus, in answer to the question whether miracles can bring people to belief in Christ, they can if the deep-down knowledge of God that Paul said we all have (Rom.1:20) is first awakened. But for those who have deliberately shut God out of their lives and their worldview, miracles won't do any more to convince them than hearing Scripture will.

Miracles, then, provide evidence for the identity of Jesus and for the truth of the message He proclaimed especially when paired with prophecy. They should thus be a part of the package of evidences we employ. We will not convince everyone of the truth of Jesus Christ. But if God chose miracles as confirming evidence, we should not shun them.

Notes

1. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 13-14.

2. Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. "Might," by O. Betz

3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 168.

4. Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas, eds. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Activity in History*

(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 33

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 89-90

7. Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 281.

8. Ibid., 286-87.

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"What is a Biblical Definition of Miracle?"

What is a biblical definition of 'miracle'?

The term "miracle" has lost much of its luster in our day. And it isn't because we see miracles taking place so often that we no longer are sensitive to their meaning. It's because our speech has evolved in such a way that today, if I got to work on time this morning, "It was a miracle that I made it, seeing that there was so much traffic on the freeway."

A biblical model and definition, on the other hand, for a miracle is another thing all together. Not everything hard to believe can be quantified as a miracle according to scriptural standards. Miracles are those acts that only God can perform; usually superceding natural laws. *Baker's Dictionary of the Bible* defines a miracle as "an event in the external world brought about by the immediate agency or the simple volition of God." It goes on to add that a miracle occurs to show that the power behind it is not limited to the laws of matter or

mind as it interrupts fixed natural laws. So the term supernatural applies quite accurately.

It's very interesting that a common word used for miracle in the New Testament can also be translated "sign." A miracle is a sign that God uses to point to Himself; the same way we follow signs to find a museum or an airport.

An interesting question may arise. Does something have to break a natural law for it to be a miracle? C.S. Lewis defines a "miracle" in his work by the same name as an interference with nature by a supernatural power. Obviously, to interfere with natural law may not necessarily mean to break the natural law. In fact, nature and "supernature" become interlocked after a miracle occurs and nature carries on according to the change wrought by that event. A science example: the law of inertia (Newton's first law of motion) states that an object will remain in rest until an external force is applied. Nature can only move from event to event through supernatural intervention.

Deists believe that it was only at creation that the supernatural and the natural related. But we Christian theists believe that God has intervened in nature by its inception, sustained it by His preserving power, and will redeem it through the final act of intervention. The creation and incarnation of Christ are the perfect examples of supernatural inertia (another way of referring to a miracle), not to mention their conclusion as well, in His second coming. God is still in the business of working miracles. And we wait eagerly for that greatest miracle of them all—the redemption of all creation.

Thanks for your question.

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