

Miracle

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Before a materialist, naturalistic culture, Christians believe and are called upon to defend their belief that God created and governs the universe. One theme of Christian philosophy and apologetics is to understand and explain why biblical accounts of miracles should be believed, what miracles are and are not, how they relate to natural processes, and what they reveal to us about God.

Definition. A *miracle* is a special act of God that interrupts the natural course of events. The Christian conception of the miraculous immediately depends on the existence of a theistic God. If the theistic God exists, miracles are possible. If there is a God who can act, then there can be acts of God. The only way to show that miracles are impossible is to disprove the existence of God.

The above statement immediately calls for clarification: what are “special acts” of God? How are they known when they occur? There must be specific distinguishing characteristics of miracles before one can analyze events that possess these characteristics. Simply to say a miracle is a singularity is insufficient. Singularities occur in nature without obvious divine intervention.

Theists define miracles in either a weak sense or a strong sense. Following Augustine, the weaker definition describes a miracle as “a portent [which] is not contrary to nature, but contrary to our knowledge of nature” (Augustine, 21.8).

Others, following Thomas Aquinas, define a miracle in the strong sense of an event that is outside nature’s power, something only done through supernatural power. This latter, stronger sense is important to apologists. A miracle is a divine intervention, a supernatural exception to the regular course of the natural world, Atheist Antony Flew put it well: “A miracle is something which would never have happened had nature, as it were, been left to its own devices” (Flew, 346). Natural laws describe naturally caused regularities; a miracle is a supernaturally caused singularity.

To expand on this definition, we need some understanding of what is meant by *natural law*. Broadly, a natural law is a general description of the usual orderly way in which the world operates. It follows, then, that a miracle is an unusual, irregular, specific way in which God acts within the world.

Probability of Miracles. Whether we can know if miracles actually happened depends on answers to three questions: (1) “are miracles possible?” (2) “are New Testament documents reliable?” (3) “were the New Testament witnesses reliable?”

An often overlooked argument is that for the probability of miracles. It is true that philosophy (i.e., arguments for God’s existence) shows miracles are *possible* but only history reveals whether they are *actual*. But it is also true that, granting existence of a theistic God, miracles are *probable*.

A theistic God has the *ability* to perform miracles since he is all-powerful or *omnipotent*. Second, he has the *desire* to perform miracles because he is all-knowing or *omniscient* and all-good or *omnibenevolent*. One who examines history to see whether God has performed any miracles already can know that God is the kind of God who *would* if he could, and he *can*.

Why would God perform miracles if he could? By nature and will he is the kind of God who desires to communicate with his creatures and do good for them. And a miracle by definition is an event that does this very thing. Miracles heal, restore, bring back life, communicate God's will, vindicate his attributes, and many more things that are in accord with his nature. Such things befit the nature of the One performing them (the Creator and Redeemer) and the need of the one for whom they are performed (the creature). By analogy, what good earthly father who had the ability to rescue his drowning child would not do everything in his power to do so? And if he had all power, then we know in advance that his goodness would lead him to do so. How much more our heavenly Father? So we know in advance of looking at the evidence for the actuality of miracles that if God exists they are not only possible but probable.

Further, if a miracle is an act of God to confirm the word of God through a messenger of God, then it is reasonable that God would want to do miracles. Through miracles, God confirms his prophets (Heb. 2:3-4). This is the way God confirmed Moses (Exod. 4) and Elijah (1 Kings 18). And this is the way he confirmed Jesus (John 3:2; Acts 2:22). How better could God confirm to us who were his spokespersons. And it is a priori probably that an intelligent, personal, moral Creator would want to communicate in the most effective way with his creatures.

Reality of Miracles. While philosophy makes supernatural events possible and the nature of a theistic God shows they are probable, only history reveals whether they are actual. But "history" here includes both the history of the cosmos and the history of the human race.

Actuality of the Miraculous in Cosmic History. A fact seldom fully appreciated is that even before we look at human history we can know that miraculous events are not only possible but *actual*. The very cosmological argument, by which we know God exists, also proves that a supernatural event has occurred. For if the universe had a beginning and, therefore, a Beginner, then God brought the universe into existence out of nothing. But ex nihilo creation out of nothing is the greatest supernatural event of all. If Jesus' making much bread out of a little bread is a miracle, then how much more is making everything out of nothing? Turning water into wine pales in comparison with creating the first water molecules. So, the surprising conclusion is that, if the Creator exists, then the miraculous is not only possible but actual. The history of the cosmos, then, reveals that the miraculous has occurred in making something out of nothing; making life out of nonlife; making the rational (mind) out of the non rational. What greater miracles could occur in human history than are already known to have occurred in cosmic history?

The Miraculous in Human History. Contrary to the widely perceived misconception, if God exists then we should come to human history with the expectation of the miraculous, not with a naturalistic bias against it. For, as we have seen, if the Creator exists, then miracles are not only possible and probable, but the miraculous has already occurred in cosmic history. God has already broken through supernaturally in the history of the cosmos and life leading up to human history. In view of this, the most reasonable expectation then, is to ask not *whether* but *where* he has broken through in human history.

The reality of miracles in human history is based on the reliability of the New Testament documents and the reliability of the New Testament witnesses. For given the trustworthiness of their combined testimony it is beyond reasonable dispute that the New Testament records numerous miraculous events.

Dimensions of Miracles. In the Bible's pattern, a miracle has several dimensions:

First, miracles have an *unusual character*. It is an out-of-the-ordinary event in contrast to the regular pattern of events in the natural world. As a “wonder” it attracts attention by its uniqueness. A burning bush that is not consumed, fire from heaven, and a person strolling on water are not normal occurrences. Hence, they draw the interest of observers.

Second, miracles have a *theological dimension*. A miracle is an act of God that presupposes a God who acts. The view that a God beyond the universe created it, controls it, and can interfere in it is *theism*.

Third, miracles have a *moral dimension*. They bring glory to God by manifesting his moral character. Miracles are visible acts that reflect the invisible nature of God. No true miracle, then, is evil, because God is good. Miracles by nature aim to produce and/or promote good.

Fourth, miracles have a *doctrinal dimension*. Miracles in the Bible are connected directly or indirectly with “truth claims”. They are ways to tell a true prophet from a false prophet (Deut. 18:22). They confirm the truth of God through the servant of God (Heb. 2:3-4). Message and miracle go hand-in-hand.

Fifth, miracles have a *teleological dimension*. Unlike magic, they are never performed to entertain (see Luke 23:8). Miracles have the distinctive purpose to glorify the Creator and to provide evidence for people to believe by accrediting the message of God through the prophet of God.

Theistic Context for a Miracle. An essential feature of biblical miracles is their theistic context. Only within a theistic worldview can a miracle be identified. When Moses came upon the burning bush (Exod. 3:1-6), he began to investigate it because of its unusual nature. The accompanying word from God told Moses that this event was not merely unusual, but a miracle. If Moses reported to convinced atheists what had happened at the burning bush, they would have been within their rights to doubt the story. In an atheistic universe it makes no sense to speak about acts of God. A burning bush and a voice would seem to the nontheist no more miraculous than the voice from heaven did to those who took it to be thunder (John 12:29), But granting that God exists and something about his rational and moral nature, these defining characteristics give miracles their apologetic power

Conclusion. We must know what we are looking for before we can recognize a miracle. First, miracles stand in contrast to nature, which is God’s regular and naturally predictable way of working in the world. Miracles are an unusual and humanly unpredictable way in which God sometimes intervenes in the events of the world. A miracle may look like any unusual occurrence, but it has a supernatural cause. It is performed with divine power, according to the divine mind, for a divine purpose, in order to authenticate a divine message or purpose.

(from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book House, 1999)

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