

A Reasonable Faith

6

Do Miracles Really Happen?

In practically every generation of mankind, there has been an accepted belief in the supernatural: that miracles can and do happen. Even today, the average person on the street is likely to believe at least in the *possibility* of miracles. When asked if they agreed with the following statement – “Even today, miracles are performed by the power of God” – 82 percent of adults in the United States completely or mostly agreed.¹ And similar percentages can be seen in most countries of the world.

Resistance to the concept of the supernatural comes mainly from scientific and scholarly circles. As we have already seen, modern science is based on a philosophy called *naturalism*, which holds that all events, past and present, can be explained in terms of natural forces operating on the world. Naturalism leaves no room for the supernatural or for the God of the Bible.

Satan’s attack on the credibility of miracles is understandable, for if miracles are discredited, so then is the resurrection of Christ – the supreme miracle of Scripture. In this lesson, we will be examining the case for miracles. Remembering that the premise of this module is that “the Christian faith is a reasonable faith,” the question we want to ask ourselves is twofold:

- Is it reasonable to believe that miracles have happened in the past as the Bible records?
- On this basis, is it reasonable to believe that miracles can happen today?

We believe that the conclusion that we will reach by the end of this lesson is “Yes!” on both counts.

Is the Christian Faith Rational?

Does God Exist?

Is the Bible God’s Word?

Do Science and Scripture Agree?

Why is There Evil in the World?

▶ **Do Miracles Really Happen?** ◀

What Should We Think of Jesus?

Did Jesus Die and Rise Again?

Is There a Heaven and Hell?

Is There No Other Way of Salvation?

Can We Really Know the Truth?

How Do I Share My Faith?

What is a Miracle?

Encyclopedia Britannica defines a miracle as “an extraordinary and astonishing happening that is attributed to the presence and action of a supernatural or divine power.”² Albert Barnes, in *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*, provides this definition:

“A miracle is an effect produced by divine power above, or opposed to, what are regular effects of the laws of nature. It is not a violation of the laws of nature, but is a suspension of their usual operation, for some important purpose.”³

We tend to use the term “miracle” quite loosely. We refer, for example, to “miracles of science.” When a student unexpectedly passes an exam, he might exclaim, “That was a miracle!” But in a biblical framework, a miracle is an event that can only be explained by the extraordinary and direct intervention of God – a divine action that breaks into and changes the ordinary course of events. To be classed as a divine miracle, it must have three attributes:

- It must be supernatural – in other words, it should have no possible human or natural cause.
- It must be linked to God – by either the command of God, by the prayer of a person to God, or by the agency of a person acting authoritatively on God’s behalf.
- It must be in line with the purposes of God and according to the principles of Scripture.

As Albert Barnes pointed out, a miracle is a *suspension* of the laws of nature, not a *violation* of them. *The Handbook of Christian Apologetics* explains it this way:

“A miracle does not ‘violate’ the laws of nature – any more than a school principal violates the schedule of classes by canceling gym for a special assembly.”⁴

It goes on to explain:

“A miracle is not a contradiction. A man who is raised back to life after being dead for four days is a miracle. A man who is both living and dead at the same time is a contradiction. God can perform miracles but not contradictions—not because his power is limited, but because contradictions are meaningless.”⁵

A miracle doesn’t contradict natural processes; it simply introduces a new element to the equation – God’s power. To illustrate what this means, let’s take as an example a very simple and practical miracle recorded in the Old Testament.

Read 2 Kings 6:1-7

The laws of physics tell us that an iron axhead does not float but rather sinks in water. Physics does not say it is *impossible* for iron to float in water. It simply

says that it cannot rise to the surface of the water unless another agency comes into play. Let's give some rather unlikely scenarios:

- **Scenario 1:** A bubble of air was released from the mud of the streambed, bringing the axhead to the surface long enough for the men to retrieve it.
- **Scenario 2:** A fish nudged it upward, holding it on its back, so that it appeared to float to the surface.
- **Scenario 3:** A time-traveling scuba-diver happened to be passing by at just the right time and compassionately lifted the axhead to surface, while keeping his presence concealed.

Note that none of these agencies in any way violated the laws of nature. They were just *extremely* improbable explanations for the rising of the axhead. As we examine the record of the Bible regarding this occurrence, the Rule of Simplest Explanation* would dictate that we discard these three scenarios as ridiculously unlikely. Since we hold the account of **2 Kings** to be a reasonable eyewitness record (see **ES108-02**), there is only one explanation that fits the account:

- **Scenario 4:** God intervened supernaturally and lifted the axhead to the surface of the water.

One of the key attributes of a divine miracle is its timing. Sometimes it is only the extraordinary timing of the event that qualifies it as a miracle from God.

Read Matthew 17:24-27

There is nothing particularly impossible about a coin being in a fish's mouth. But it is an event that is highly unlikely, and what makes the entire episode particularly special is the prediction of Jesus. He told Peter to go to the lake and throw in a fishing line and the first fish he caught would have a coin in its mouth. It was the *exact* fish with the *exact* right coin at the *exact* right time that made this event a miracle.

Another example of timing is the plagues of locusts in Egypt (**Exodus 10:12-19**). There is nothing necessarily miraculous about a plague of locusts – such plagues happen on occasions and can be very devastating. What makes this plague so clearly a miracle (so that even Pharaoh could not deny that it was from God) was the timing and the severity (note **Exodus 10:15**). The plague was initiated when Moses stretched out his staff against Egypt and was terminated upon the intercession of Moses before God.

A Book of Miracles

The Bible is unarguably a book of miracles. If you cut out every reference to a miracle in the Bible, you would be left with a much thinner book. As Peter Kreeft explains it:

* The Rule of Simplest Explanation is often called "Ockham's Razor." William of Ockham, a scholastic of the 14th century, is credited with formulating this logical device, stating that "entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity." In other words, the simplest explanation for an event or condition is usually the correct one.

“Subtract miracles from Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism, and you have essentially the same religion left. Subtract miracles from Christianity, and you have nothing but the clichés and platitudes most American Christians get weekly (and weakly) from their pulpits. Nothing distinctive, no reason to be a Christian rather than something else.”⁶

We find that miracles in the Bible are never arbitrary or superfluous. In fact, they only happen for one of three reasons:

- As confirmation of divine communication
- As seals of a divine mission
- As acts of divine compassion

The Old Testament Record

The Old Testament records the repeated intervention of God into human history. In fact, to deny the miracles of the pre-Christ era “would deprive us of some of the most precious evidences we possess of the character of God.”⁷ Moses gave this challenge to the people of Israel in **Deuteronomy 4:32-35**:

“Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things *so that you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other.*”

There has been a tendency in the last two centuries to try to divorce the Bible’s history of supernatural intervention from its moral teachings. Yet you cannot have one without the other. As Henry Wace explains:

“...the Ten Commandments are introduced with the declaration: ‘I am Yahweh thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,’ and on this follows: ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’ (**Exodus 20:2-3**). Without these miracles, the God of the Jews would be an abstraction. As manifested in them, He is the living God, with a known character, ‘a just God and a Savior’ (**Isaiah 45:21**), who can be loved with all the heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.”⁸

In the Old Testament, **the pivotal miracle is the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt**, including the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. This miracle (or series of miracles) is the basis of the covenant God made with the people of Israel and the foundation for the rest of the Old Testament.

The New Testament Record

Anyone who even skims through the Gospel story would see that the Gospel accounts are a chronicle of the miraculous. From the birth of Jesus right through to his ascension, the Gospel thrums with miraculous events – angelic appearances, divine guidance, healings, resurrections, demonstrations of divine power and revelations of God’s glory. In **Acts 2:22**, the *New Living Translation* declares:

“God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him...”

What is of particular interest is that Luke, who records a significant portion of the miracles of the New Testament, was a physician. He was considered the man of science of his day, making him one of the most credible witnesses in the whole of the ancient world. For example, when Luke tells us of the healing of a fever (**Luke 4:38-39**), he uses the medical term for a violent fever, showing that he had a medical understanding of the condition and understood the significance of this particular healing.

Not only does Luke make it clear that he “carefully investigated” the miraculous events of the Gospel story (see **Luke 1:3**), he also personally witnessed numerous miracles in the course of his companionship with Paul.

Read Acts 16:16-18

Read Acts 16:25-26

Read Acts 19:11-12

Read Acts 20:9-12

Read Acts 28:3-9

And Paul himself showed no hesitation to use the testimony of miracles to underscore his argument of grace over law (see **Galatians 3:5**). If miracles had not really happened “in their midst” as he claimed, then his argument would have immediately collapsed. As Gordon Fee observed:

“Paul wrote as if every Christian had experienced signs and wonders.”⁹

In the New Testament, **the pivotal miracle is the resurrection of Christ**. Without this miracle, the Christian faith is meaningless. As Paul points out in **1 Corinthians 15:17**:

“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”

The *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* explains the critical role that the miraculous plays in the Christian faith:

“If miracles are impossible, then they are not actual, and if no miracles ever actually happened, then Christianity is false. For the fundamental claims and doctrines of Christianity are all miracles: Incarnation, resurrection, salvation, inspiration. If any one of these objections is valid, the whole of Christianity is refuted.”¹⁰

The Rise of Scientism

Down through the generations of the Bible, the people of Israel regarded the miracles of their history as the evidence that God had made a binding covenant with them. Even Gideon never questioned the credibility of historical miracles. He just asked why they weren't happening in his generation (see **Judges 6:13**).

How is our generation different? The last four hundred years have seen the slow rise of science *as a way to view the world*.

The unparalleled success of science has been in its remarkable ability to address and solve problems. But what most people don't realize is that science is not just the gaining of knowledge that can be applied to our world. It is also a worldview – a lens through which we can view the world. Science doesn't just give birth to technology; it also gives birth to philosophy. As Bryan Appleyard, in his book *Understanding the Present*, explains it:

“...science is our faith and our age's unique signature.”¹¹

At the conclusion of his book, *A Brief History of Time*, scientist Stephen Hawking expresses his belief that the study of physics may soon result in a “Theory of Everything.” This set of simple equations would contain within them a mathematical model describing everything that has happened or could happen in our universe. At that time, we would know the rules by which the game of existence is played. Hawking concludes:

“Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we should know the mind of God.”¹²

The view that science is the answer to our lives – that it holds the secret to our existence and ultimately can answer every question – is called *scientism*. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines scientism as “an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation.” Scientism, the philosophy that extends from science, is the belief that science holds the sole key to an explanation of life, the universe and everything.

Science works – no one can argue with that. We see its fruit around us every day. But with science comes, by extension, the philosophy of scientism, which not only excludes the supernatural intervention of God, but also seeks to replace it with its own kind of intervention. Science performs “miracles” of its own. It intervenes in your life, reorders it and purports to provide practical solutions to your problems. Do you want to communicate with someone across the nation? No problem, we've invented the telephone. Do you want to listen to your favorite music? Here's a CD player. Do you want to become more efficient at work? Here's the latest computer technology. Do you want to lose weight? Here's how. Do you want to succeed in life? Here's the latest best-selling book.

In **James 5:14-15**, James tells us:

“Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up...”

Scientism says:

“Is any one of you sick? Here, pop a pill.”*

Scientism doesn't actually demand that you *not* believe in God. It just seeks to marginalize God, placing the achievements of man – and more importantly, *faith* in the achievements of man – at the center of your life. Scientism doesn't target your *belief* in God; it targets your *faith* in God.

For more information on this subject, read the article “Scientism and the Christian,” which can be found at <http://www.online-bible-college.com/articles/scientism.htm>.

This means that deciding on the veracity of the miracles of the Bible is not just an academic exercise. Biblical miracles are the basis of a genuinely biblical worldview.

Are Miracles Possible?

Are the miracles of the Bible consistent with a rational view of the universe? From the very start of this module, we've insisted that the Christian faith is a *reasonable* faith. This means that the Christian belief in the miracles of the Bible is based on an *intelligent* faith. So for us the question comes down to this:

Is it intelligent to believe that divine miracles, as the Bible describes them, are possible?

The first thing we need to understand is that miracles cannot be reconciled with science. By their very nature, they defy scientific explanation, since they involve an intervention by God that cannot be predicted or reproduced by any known law of science.

Naturalistic science is based on one of three basic assumptions:

- There is no God
- *Or*, There is a God, but he is unable to circumvent his own natural laws
- *Or*, There is a God, but he has no direct interest in humanity

In essence, then, science assumes that there is no God *for practical purposes*. In fact, for science to work at all, the scientist has to assume that the laws of nature will never be circumvented or interrupted by an outside influence. The scientist assumes that the universe is a closed system, and for most things – like running experiments on rats in a laboratory maze, or conducting forensic experiments at a crime scene, or building an atomic bomb – that assumption works fine.

* This doesn't mean that the Christian should not take advantage of the benefits of medical science. Some people misinterpret **James 5:14-15**, believing that even going to see a doctor demonstrates a lack of faith. This is not the case. If a child has a high fever, you should take him to see a doctor. But the first recourse should be to pray. If you would like to read more on this, you will find an article entitled “Scientism and the Christian” at <http://www.online-bible-college.com/articles/scientism.htm>.

Remember that these are working assumptions only, not scientific fact. Before you can categorically state that there is no such thing as miracles, you must emphatically believe that *for practical purposes* there is no God. Yet this most basic of assumptions is not itself provable by the scientific method. Science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God; and science cannot determine God's interest, or lack of it, in humanity. However firmly it may be believed, to state that God never intervenes in human history is an assumption only. It is a philosophical stand, not a scientific one.

Paul Little casts an interesting light on the philosophy of those who refuse to allow God room to override his own natural laws:

“To take such a position...is practically to deify natural law, to capitalize it in such a way that whatever God there may be becomes the prisoner of natural law and, in effect, ceases to be God.”¹³

Dare we be so presumptuous as to make God a prisoner of his own creation? Would we, mere man, be so arrogant as to sit as judge of God himself and rule that he should only sit back and watch how human history unfolds. Would we be so bold as to put boundaries around God, denying him any recourse to intervene in human affairs with demonstrations of his power and revelations of his will? *Easton's Bible Dictionary* explains:

“An atheist or a pantheist must, as a matter of course, deny the possibility of miracles; but to one who believes in a personal God, who in his wisdom may see fit to interfere with the ordinary processes of nature, miracles are not impossible, nor are they incredible.”¹⁴

The book *Concise Theology* has this to say:

“There is nothing irrational about believing that God who made the world can still intrude creatively into it. Christians should recognize that it is not faith in the biblical miracles, and in God's ability to work miracles today should he so wish, but doubt about these things, that is unreasonable.”¹⁵

As Bible-believing Christians, we cannot *prove* to a skeptic that the miracles of the Bible actually happened. But what we *can* do is argue persuasively on two counts:

- That a rational view of the universe still allows the *possibility* of miracles
- That the witness accounts of miracles in the Bible are *credible*

Science simply does not have the authority to state categorically that miracles are impossible. As long as God exists, miracles are technically possible. Thus the only way to disallow the possibility of miracles is to disprove the existence of God – a challenge that, as we saw in **ES108-02**, is impossible to meet.

For this reason, miracles cannot be dismissed on purely philosophical grounds. They can only be dismissed on historical grounds. Did God, at such and such a time, perform a miracle or not?

The issue of whether miracles have happened in the past thus comes down to the credibility of the historical documents. Before we can dismiss the miraculous content of **Exodus**, for example, we need to investigate whether the historical record of **Exodus** is consistent with what archaeology and anthropology have uncovered regarding the period. Time and again, as we learned in **ES108-03** and will soon see in **ES108-07** and **ES108-08**, the Biblical records prove to be exemplary. As *Easton's Bible Dictionary* states:

“[The miracles of the Bible] are credible just as any facts of history well authenticated are credible.”¹⁶

The Bible constantly bears witness to a God who acts in human history. As **Hebrews 2:4** declares:

“...God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will.”

The issue of whether the miracles of the Bible happened or not comes down to two simple questions:

- Does God exist?
- What is God like?

The Bible has its own answer. The *New Living Translation* renders **Psalms 77:14** with these words:

“You are the God of miracles and wonders!...”

¹ *PRRC Emerging Trends*, Princeton Religion Research Center, 11/88, *Leadership*, Vol.10, no.3, excerpted from Bible Illustrator 3.0.

² *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Miracle,” 1999 Standard Edition CD-ROM.

³ *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁴ *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁵ *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁶ Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans* (San Francisco: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p.273.

⁷ Henry Wace, quoted in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁸ Henry Wace, quoted in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁹ Gordon Fee, “Paul and His Times,” *Christian History*, no.47, excerpted from Bible Illustrator 3.0.

¹⁰ *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

¹¹ Bryan Appleyard, *Understanding the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p.xiv.

¹² Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Bantam, 1998), p.175.

¹³ Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1987), p.85.

¹⁴ *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

¹⁵ *Concise Theology*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

¹⁶ *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

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