

Miracles

I. Introduction

- A. The miraculous assumptions of Christianity are a major stumbling block to its critics. This anti-supernatural view was pretty well summarized by the philosopher, Spinoza in the 17th century:

Miracles are violations of natural laws.
Natural laws are immutable.
It is impossible for immutable laws to be violated.
Therefore, miracles are impossible.

- B. Seven Major Questions about Miracles:

1. What is a miracle?
2. How can a miracle be recognized or documented?
3. Does God perform miracles today?
4. Can Satan perform miracles?
5. Can a person be a good scientist and believe in miracles?
6. What is the purpose of miracles?
7. What is the nature of the natural?

II. The Problem of definition

- A. The pantheistic view: Everything is miraculous. *birth, a flower, etc.*

If everything is a miracle, then in essence, nothing is a miracle.

- B. The deistic view: Miracles occur when a wholly transcendent god violates a law of nature. The laws of nature are seen as a thing independent of God. God created them, but they run on their own.

This view is very difficult to defend both logically (See Spinoza's argument) and Biblically. It is also contrary to the Bible's teaching on providence. It has God disrupting His created order.

- C. Miracles are effects of little known, or misunderstood laws of nature. *Jesus Christ rose from the dead and someday science will be able to account for it.* This is a *God of the gaps* argument. God is whatever I don't understand.

D. Unusual coincidences which are interpreted as God's answer to prayer.

Illustration: A man jumps from an airplane and his parachute fails to open properly. His parachute, however, catches in the limbs of a tree, the only tree in the area! The man is spared injury.

This can certainly be called a miracle, but it is not in the same category as the events in the New Testament, e.g. John's gospel.

All of the above fall short of a Biblically satisfying answer.

III. The Biblical description of miracles. Three Greek words are used: (Note the OT also uses three words which are, for the most part, an exact parallel of the Greek words in the NT)

A. *semeion*: A sign. (78 times). Jesus speaks of his resurrection as a *sign*. ...*But none will be given it except for the sign of the prophet Jonah*. Matt. 12:39. See also Matt. 16:1,4. A *semeion* was an event with divine significance.

B. *teras*. A wonder. (16 times). It is also used in combination with *semeion*. Used of Jesus' miracles in John 4:48. *teras* means something very unusual, out of the ordinary, amazing, or astonishing.

C. *dunamis*. A power. (120 times) It is sometimes used of ordinary power, but is often translated *miracle*. It is often used in combination with *semeion* and *teras*. It emphasizes the source of the event.

IV. The Biblical Definition of Miracles

A. A Biblical definition must be drawn from a systematic study of the aforementioned words. Geisler seems to meet this criteria in his definition:

*...a miracle, then, is an unusual event (wonder) that conveys and confirms an unusual (divine) message (sign) by means of unusual power (power). From God's perspective a miracle is an act of God (power) to attract the attention of the people of God (wonder) to the Word of God (sign). from: **Miracles and Modern Thought**, p.116.*

A miracle is:

1. *Unusual*. It stands in contrast to that which is natural. It is something unpredictable and uncontrollable.
2. A demonstration of *awesome power*, the power of the Creator. It is not a power that suspends or violates natural law though it may appear so.
3. A *sign*. Biblical miracles are teleological; they have a purpose. They *are signs*. They are never to entertain.

B. Reasons for miracles:

1. To Glorify God. Jn. 2:11; 11:40.
2. To accredit certain persons as messengers of God. The miracle authenticates the message and the messenger. Heb. 2:3-4.
3. To meet human need. Feeding the 5000.
4. As evidence for the deity of Christ. Jn. 6:2,14; 20:30-31.
5. Summary: Miracles get our attention. They instruct us. They are theological in nature (God centered). They are moral, and they have a distinct purpose.

V. Miracles and the Providence of God.

The Biblical doctrine of Providence teaches that the Creator is working out His plan through His created works. With regard to miracles, it is essential to understand that God is working in the natural flow of events as much as He is when He performs a miracle. Nature is simply God's customary way of acting. There is therefore, a uniformity to nature which makes science possible. However, a Biblically committed Christian does not believe the universe is a *self-contained* or *closed system*. God, because He is God, can act contrary to ordinary events. When He does, we classify these acts as miraculous.

VI. Miracles and the Supernatural

Not all supernatural acts originate from God. Satan apparently has the power to cause events which cannot be explained on a purely natural basis. In other words, they are not just deceptive acts, i.e. sleight of hand tricks. See IIThess. 2:9, Rev. 13:14; 16:14. The same Greek words are used to describe these events. They are, however, of a noticeably different caliber. Satan's power is finite. His acts are meant to deceive. They are supernatural events but not miracles in the Biblical sense.

VII. Miracles Today

A question on the minds of many Christians today is: *Does God perform miracles today?* We know that God can. The question is, does He? If we follow closely our definition of a Biblical miracle, and what the Bible teaches about the purpose of miracles, we must conclude that for *the most part*, this kind of miracle ceased shortly after the New Testament was completed. In order for God's Messiah and His Apostles to be accredited, spectacular signs were necessary, and were part of God's plan just as they were to accredit Moses in the OT. In recent books by New testament scholar, Craig Keener, and investigative reporter, Lee Srobel, document many contemporary miracles around the world.

The superstructure of the Church was built upon a foundation of Christ and His Apostles.

See Eph. 2:20; I Cor. 3:10-11; Rev. 21:14. Since the foundation of a building only needs to be laid once, we may be sure that God has not given any new revelation to His people since the Apostles died. The fact that only His Apostles belonged in the foundation is seen clearly in our Lord's high priestly prayer, when He prayed for those who would believe on Him *through their word*, namely the word of the Apostles to whom *all the truth* would be given by the Holy Spirit. See: John 17:20; 16:13.

If God is indeed allowing certain men the gift to perform miracles today the following questions need to be asked: why are there so few of them? Why are their powers so limited? And why are the results so doubtful? When Jesus performed miracles they were abundant; they were spectacular, and they were totally undeniable!

This does not mean that God does not answer prayer today. He certainly does, and when He does often believers are certain of God's intervention. God does heal today, but the process (in most cases) is very different than the miraculous approach that we see in the NT.

VIII. Summary

The problem in the belief of miracles goes back to one's primary assumptions. If one believes in the infinite, creator-god of the Bible then miracles are something we would expect to have happened and we must be open to the possibility that God can perform miracles today according to His own will and plan. In contrast, if a person assumes that the universe is closed system of natural laws that have existed for eternity, then miracles would be absurd. To deny miracles on this basis is roughly akin to saying: *What my net does not catch ain't fish.*

IX. For Further Study

We highly recommend the following books in the study of miracles:

Miracles and The Critical Mind. Colin Brown
Miracles and Modern Thought. by Norman L. Geisler
In Defense of Miracles. Edited by Doug Geivett, & Gary Habermas
Miracles, Demons, and Spiritual Warfare. By Edward N. Gross
Miracles, Craig S. Keener (2 vols.)
Miracles: A Preliminary Study. By C.S. Lewis
The Case For Miracles. By Lee Strobel