

1 **Miracles and Science**

- Module: Science
- Lesson 29

2 **Some Recommended Sources on Miracles**

- Eric Metaxes, Miracles
- John Lennox,
 - God's Undertaker, Has Science Buried God?
 - Gunning for God, Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target
- Frank Turek, "Do Miracles Occur" podcast: <https://crossexamined.org/miracles-do-they-occur/> (50 min.)
- Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks, When Skeptics Ask
- Norman Geisler, Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics
- Craig Keener, Miracles (2 vol.)
- William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith

3 **Some Confusion About Miracles**

- "Miracle on Ice"
- United States hockey team defeats Russia in the 1980 Olympics

4 **Misuse of the Word**

- A cavalier use of the word miracle (using it to refer to things that aren't actually miraculous), tends to diminish our concept of those things which are truly miraculous.
- "The only thing that will kill the possibility of miracles more quickly than a committed materialism is the claiming of miracle status for everyday events for which natural explanations are readily at hand."
—John Lennox, Gunning for God—

5 **Kinds of Unusual Events (with thanks to Frank Turek)**

- Anomalies (freaks of nature)
 - Power: nature
 - Traits: highly unusual
 - e.g. An albino frog
- Magic (illusions)
 - Power: human
 - Traits: "Unnatural" and man controlled, historically used to mimic miracles

- e.g. Rabbit in the hat, card tricks

6 **Kinds of Unusual Events** **(thanks to Frank Turek)**

- Psychosomatic
 - Power: the human mind
 - Traits: highly unusual, may appear supernatural
 - Requires "faith" (intense mental concentration), fails for some
- Satanic activity
 - Power: Evil power, demonic
 - Traits: evil, falsehood, occult, limited, extraordinary
 - e.g. Strength of the demoniac in Mark 5

7 **Kinds of Unusual Events** **(thanks to Frank Turek)**

- Providence
 - Prearranged events
 - Power: Divine
 - Naturally explained
 - e. g. Fog at Normandy on D-day, story of Esther
- Miracles
 - Divine act
 - Power: Supernatural (supersedes the normal laws and capabilities of nature)
 - Never fails, immediate, enduring, glory to God
 - e. g. Raising the dead, raising axe head (Elisha), healing withered hand

8 **Are Miracles Possible?** **Figures Who Shaped The Modern Mind**

- Baruch (Benedict) de Spinoza (1632-1677, Dutch philosopher): argued that miracles were impossible because divine nature and natural law were identical (pantheism).

- David Hume (1711-1776, Scottish philosopher): following Spinoza, argued that a miracle was, by definition, a violation of the Laws of nature, which could not occur. (Christians may at times accept this misleading definition, putting themselves at a disadvantage.)
 - In principle, one could never know if a miracle occurred because even if one had "full proof" against such proof there would be arrayed the even greater "proof" of all the evidence of the regularity of nature.
 - In fact, it would be impossible to ever find sufficient evidence for a miracle, as only primitive and barbarous people believed in miracles, and miracle claims run counter to "universal human experience."
- William Paley (1743-1805, English theologian and philosopher): countering Hume, argued that Hume's "universal human experience" argument begs the question, and that it was possible to have sufficient credible witnesses to a miracle.

9 So, What Is a Miracle?

- A working definition: "An extraordinary event with an unusual supernatural cause." -Craig Keener-
 - It is a singular (extraordinary) event for which there is no natural causation operating according to natural law.
 - An act of God which inspires awe or wonder.
- A miracle serves in some measure as a sign.
 - The Greek word (dunamis) sometimes translated miracle means power. Frequently used in association with the phrase "signs and wonders". The Greek word semeion is also sometimes rendered as sign by some translations. So miracles are typically understood to have some signification in a particular context.
 - Hence the context of the event considered a miracle becomes relevant. (Does it occur in a spiritually charged context?)
 - e. g. The resurrection of Jesus, absent the charged religious context—His claims about himself, His predictions re: His death & resurrection, his conflict w/the religious rulers, the reasons for his execution, etc. —would have been an ambiguous event, signifying nothing.

10 So, What Is a Miracle?

- A miracle as God's actions in relation to nature.
 - Sometimes it is an unusual, supernatural event, but operates by conspicuously employing elements of nature (e.g. opening of the Red Sea w/wind, Jesus anointing eyes with spittle/mud).

- Sometimes it operates completely apart from any apparent cooperation of nature's elements. (e.g. floating of the axe head, virgin birth, resurrection).
- Important point: A denial of the possibility of miracles philosophically assumes that a theistic God does not exist. To establish the impossibility of miracles, one must logically first establish the non-existence of the God of theism (e.g. be an atheist, deist, or pantheist, etc.). If a theistic God is possible, then, by definition, miracles are possible.

11 **Uses of Miracles Seen in Scripture**

- To authenticate a divinely approved message and/or messenger.
(e.g. Elijah and the prophets of Baal)
- To make clear God's concern for, or to act on behalf of the well-being of His people (Israel/the Church).
(e.g. Deliverance of Peter from prison)
- To testify of God's concern for those outside His people (in view of leading them to Christ).
(e.g. Healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter)

12 **Seven Common Arguments Against Miracles**

- A miracle would violate the unchangeable laws of nature. (Spinoza, Hume)
- Science (knowledge of nature and its laws) disproves the possibility of miracles.
- Miracle claims run contrary to "universal human experience." (There is no credible evidence of miracles occurring.)
(Hume)
- Only "primitive and barbarous" people believed in miracles because they did not know or understand the laws of nature. (Hume)
- A miracle claim would require extraordinary evidence to be believable. (Hume)
- Given the many obvious bogus miracle claims one shouldn't believe any miracle claim. (Hume)
- Miracle claims from competing religious traditions render miracle claims unreliable. (Hume)

13 **1. Do Miracles "Violate" the Laws of Nature?**

- Uses of the word "law".
 - The prescriptive (legal) sense of law.
 - The descriptive (scientific) sense of law.
- Miracles as "violations" of the Laws of Nature?
 - The Laws of Nature are descriptions arrived at inductively (from our observations of nature).
 - If we observe a miraculous event, then how could that be a "violation" of our observations of nature?

14 **1. Do Miracles "Violate" the Laws of Nature?**

- God transcends the Laws of Nature.

- One “violates” only those laws to which one is subject, but the God of theism transcends the laws of nature, indeed he is constantly sustaining the regularity of nature. (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3)
- God is free to act to intervene in the normal process of nature.
 - Then the new situation immediately behaves according to the Laws of Nature.
 - Hence, the Laws of Nature are neither violated or overthrown.
- Given the first singularity (creation of the cosmos), why would we expect that God is limited to only one singularity?

15 **C. S. Lewis on Miracles and the Laws of Nature**

- “If God annihilates or deflects or creates a unit of matter, he has created a new situation at that point. Immediately nature domiciles this new situation, makes it a home in her realm, adapt all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws. If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born.”

16 **2. Does Science Disprove the Possibility of Miracles?**

- Science, as science, is limited to knowledge of the natural world and natural causes and effects, so it cannot assess the cause of specific, singular events with divine (super-natural) causation.
- “Scientists are experts about the normal happenings of nature, but when asking whether something outside the norm happens, they no longer speak as scientists per se, because how to address anomalies or metanormal phenomenon is a philosophic [or theological] question.”
—Craig Keener, Miracles—
- The claim that science denies the possibility of miracles is not a scientific claim, but is simply the repetition of David Hume’s philosophical presuppositions.

17 **3. Are Miracle Claims Contrary to Universal Human Experience?**

- William Paley refuted Hume’s “universal human experience” argument against miracles.
 - Hume’s argument presupposes what it seeks to prove, that miracles never happen. (It begs the question, is a circular argument.)
 - Paley (and many others) showed, contra Hume, that it is possible to have credible witnesses to miracles.
 - Hume’s claim runs counter to what we now know about evaluating competing hypotheses by assessing probabilities (Bayesian methodology).
 - In fact, as Craig Keener’s research shows, there is a vast amount of evidence across the world throughout history, and in contemporary testimony, of the occurrence of miracles.

18 **3. Are Miracle Claims Contrary to Universal Human Experience?**

- Miracles occur today and many are scientifically documented. (Medical records, etc.)

- Why do we seem to see so few miracles in modern Western societies?
 - Miracles are, by definition, rare events—
 - Otherwise they would not serve their primary purpose as signs.
 - If miracles were common we would not be able to rely on the constancy of nature.
 - Western societies, since the Enlightenment, have a bias against the supernatural not shared by peoples in the Majority World.
 - Faith is a crucial element in many miracles (but not all).
 - Even many Western Christians are highly dubious regarding miracles.
 - Remember, Jesus did not do many miracles in Nazareth “because of their unbelief.” (Matt. 13:58)

19 4. Do Only Primitive and Barbarous People Believe in Miracles?

- Primitive, pre-scientific people understood the almost exceptionless regularity of nature.
 - e. g. Primitive people knew people do not walk on water or rise from the dead. (Recall the incredulity of Zacharias when told Elizabeth was to bear a son.)
 - “Proposing that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead was just as controversial nineteen hundred years ago as it is today. The discovery that dead people stayed dead was not first made by the philosophers of the Enlightenment.” (N. T. Wright in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*)
- Miracles were viewed as miracles by primitive peoples, and evoked their astonishment, precisely because they understood the constancy and regularity of nature.
 - (e. g. The feeding of the five thousand. The changing of water into wine. The raising of Lazarus.)

20 5. Do Miracle Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence?

- This is a common objection to miracles, suggesting that somehow the evidence needs to be as startling or unusual as the claimed miracle itself.
 - The requirement, however, is highly ambiguous. What kind of “extraordinary evidence” is being asked for?
 - It may be a skeptic’s way of saying “It doesn’t matter how much evidence you give me, it won’t be enough to convince me.”
 - In reality, the evidence cited only needs to be more likely to exist if the miracle occurred than the same evidence would exist if the miracle had not occurred.
 - “What is crucial, is that the evidence be far more probable given that the event did occur than given that it did not. The bottom line is that it doesn’t always take a huge amount of evidence to establish a miracle.” - William Lane Craig-

21 6. Do Bogus Miracle Claims Invalidate All Miracle Claims?

- Bogus claims are in no way evidence against the real thing.

- The existence of counterfeits points to the existence of the real thing. (Nobody prints counterfeit \$3 bills, they only print counterfeits of real currency.)
- A person who believes in miracles has no obligation to believe all miracle claims.
- The existence of bogus claims does call for a careful consideration of the evidence for a claim before one accepts it as true.
- The implications of a claimed miracle have a bearing on how much one should invest in investigating its merits. The claim that Jesus rose from the dead has far more profound implications than the claim the Emperor Vespasian healed a blind man.

22 7. Do Miracle Claims of Other Religions Disprove Christian Miracle Claims?

- We have no reason to assume that God would never provide miracles for anyone of another religion if He had sufficient reason to do so?
- Not all unusual events should be classified as miracles even if they are claimed to be miraculous. (remember Turek's distinctions).
- Not all miracle claims are equal in their credibility. (e.g. there is no comparison between the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and the supposed miracles performed by Mohammad.)
- One should also consider the possibility of demonic activity intended to deceive people.

23 Some Concluding Points

- A miracle is an act of God which momentarily alters the normal operations of nature and which inspires awe and serves as a sign.
- A miracle occurs within a religious context which sets the stage for its significance (sign).
- Miracles are not contrary to science, but beyond science.
- Miracles could and did happen in history.
- Miracles can and do happen today, all over the world, and are a significant cause of the Gospel's success in many places today.
- Given reasonable criteria, it is possible to know with a high degree of confidence that a miracle has occurred.
- There is substantial credible historical evidence that the resurrection of Jesus and his other miracles actually occurred.

24 Next Week:

- The Bible as God's Word