

Thinking About the Bible

John McWilliams

thinkingaboutthebible.com

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Are Modern Miracles Real?

Suppose it's a hot summer day and your car dies on a deserted stretch of highway. You have a baby on board who is becoming restless and did I mention—you forgot the bag with all the baby paraphernalia! What will you do? Suddenly, a baby bag falls onto the road beside you. Unknown to you, a baggage compartment door on a passing plane had come loose, allowing a traveler's bag to fall. The bag has diapers, water, and even toys! Then all at once, the sun begins to darken. Oh, you forgot that there would be a solar eclipse today? A cool shadow envelops the area as you give your baby a drink and change her diaper. As the eclipse ends and the baby sleeps, a large bus pulls up. It's your college roommate who is now a famous rock star. She invites you into the bus and agrees to take you home.

Wow! What a coincidence!

Really? Is it possible for the bag to fall as described? Well, yes. There is a painfully small chance, but it could certainly have happened by natural means. And the eclipse? Eclipses are rare in any one particular place, but they happen *somewhere* with some regularity. It does seem like a big coincidence that your rock star friend just happened by, but that too is within the realm of natural occurrences.

Even if we consider the probability of all these events coinciding at a particular place and time (an *astoundingly* small probability!), we still must admit that statistically speaking, there is a chance. But let's face it—this was a miracle! And the reason we can (in faith) assume that is because of the “fitness” of the events. It isn't simply statistical reasoning that defines the miracle. The events occurred in a *context*—the context of your specific need. We intuitively know from the context, when a miracle has occurred. Skeptics might still balk, but appeals to purely

statistical analyses fall by the wayside when viewed from a specific, unique narrative. Lewis explains...

...miracles must, of course, interrupt the usual course of Nature; but if they are real they must, in the very act of so doing, assert all the more the unity and self-consistency of total reality at some deeper level. They will not be like unmetrical lumps of prose breaking the unity of the poem; they will be like that crowning audacity which, though it may be paralleled nowhere else in the poem, yet coming just where it does, and effecting just what it effects, is (to those who understand) the supreme revelation of the unity in the poem's conception.¹

The story of Balaam's talking donkey (Numbers 22) is often cited as an example of the ridiculous nature of some biblical miracles. I must admit that this account did bother me at one time. Superficially, it seems somewhat on the silly side. Why would God make a donkey speak when he has the power to do any number of more convincing miracles? But God's Word is hardly meant to be taken superficially. The event *in its context* is rich with meaning.

To summarize, Balaam was a pagan diviner through whom God was about to give a prophetic message to his people Israel. Can God use a pagan sorcerer as a mouthpiece? Would his message be true, comprehensible, and valid? For an answer, we need look no further than the miracle. Could God use a donkey to give a message? Apparently so. In case Israel, contemporary readers, or even Balaam himself ever doubted God's ability to speak truth through whomever he pleases, the case is now closed. Had God willed, the donkey could have just as easily proclaimed the message instead of Balaam!

Our previous definition of a miracle was from God's view. Let's now describe miracles and supernatural events from our limited perspective: *An event with exceedingly low probability, which occurs meaningfully within a specific context.*

¹ C.S. Lewis, "Miracles," *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 355.

The skeptical side of me says that people are notoriously bad at discerning miracles. Certainly, God can and does work miracles whenever and however he chooses. Yet I'm guessing a large proportion of modern miracles fall into the *mistaken identification* category, the majority of these being merely statistical phenomena. *Events of low probability may simply happen, given enough time and a large pool of events.* I've personally witnessed charismatic events in which participants are very likely experiencing something more akin to psychology than to phenomenology.

We might also expect some miracles to be hoaxes. In churches alone (Catholic and Protestant), we have witnessed scandals engineered for the profit or prestige of the parties involved. These we'll classify as *directed human activity*. This doesn't necessarily have to involve deliberate trickery. An overworked sitcom example... Suppose you witness a murder, then later see the victim walking around in good health. Oh, what you didn't know was that you had observed a group rehearsing a scene from a play. From your perspective, though, it seemed a "miracle" had occurred.

At this point, I probably seem quite cynical. I've bashed miracles and accused some of my brothers and sisters of deception. I would argue that Scripture commands us to be discerning. Miracles are rare. As one wise person said, "That's why they're not called *normals*."

But now perhaps we can more effectively examine that small group that remains—those miracles that occur with very low probability *and* that exist within a context of real narratives and events. Instead of starting with modern miracles, let's see how truly *bona fide* miracles—those performed by Jesus—display unique characteristics.

In chapter 9 of John's gospel, Jesus heals a blind man. We are told this man has been blind since birth which implies that his condition was long-term, incurable by conventional treatment, and well-known by the community. Even today with modern technology, there is little chance that total blindness can be cured, so his restored sight was an extremely low probability. There might be statisticians who still claim that the event is improbable yet possible by normal means. But there is more involved in this miracle.

The context of a miracle is more convincing than the mathematics. Consider the big picture... A rabbi claiming to be God happens to come across the blind man. The local group of religious leaders needed to learn a spiritual lesson. Twelve disciples needed training in the supernatural. A community (who had spent years dealing with the blind man and knew him well) needed faith in a Savior. And possibly most significant, God had decided a couple of decades earlier that a baby would receive a defect so that all of this could come together at a particular place and time.

In another well-known miracle, Jesus feeds thousands with a basket of fish and bread. Skeptics are quick to dismiss this account simply because it's *too* miraculous, so it's a good example to cite. I believe it would require an even greater miracle to fake or cause misidentification of this event. The probability of fooling one person might be calculable, but I would assume close-up sleight-of-hand involving twelve servers and multiple thousands pushes the limits of probability.

Once again, several components within a context take even a low probability to the next level... A situation occurs in which thousands of people have a physical need. Twelve disciples need more hands-on instruction. A crowd of sinners at a particular time and place need faith in a Savior. God desires an example that will inform for centuries and glorify him for eternity. Now that's a miracle!

Are modern miracles non-existent or just extremely rare? I believe I can say with certainty that true miracles are at least rarer than most people imagine. But I would never want to be in the position of boxing God into a quota, based on my flawed human reasoning. I believe the "safest" approach would be to hold the miracle in question up to the light of genuine New Testament miracles. Here are some characteristics of the miracles recorded in Scripture. This isn't meant to be a checklist, but rather a qualitative model that reveals by its uniqueness the counterfeit.

- Biblical miracles were easily and naturally attributable to God. Although God may have used people as channels, there was never a question as to the source.

- Obviously, the recipients of miracles benefitted, but biblical miracles were intended *primarily* for the benefit of the observers. Furthermore, the ultimate benefit was the spread of the gospel.
- Other than enhancing their authority to spread the gospel of Christ, miracles did not benefit the one performing them.
- Miracles did not contradict Scripture in any way, nor did they add information to Scripture.
- The results of a miracle were immediate and permanent (for the life of the recipient).

Compared with biblical accounts, many modern “miracles” fall miserably short on one or more of these points. Believers must guard against “Godless myths and old wives’ tales” that ultimately lead away from God rather than bring him glory. God can and will use miracles as he pleases, but he doesn’t need the assistance of even our well-meaning stage shows.