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Are Miracles Possible?

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Philosophers and sociologists have observed that in the wake of the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, we now live in a disenchanted age. Many modern people believe the universe is governed exclusively by impersonal physical laws, and that the sacred and transcendent are illusory ideas belonging to a bygone era.

According to Richard Dawkins, for example: “The nineteenth century is the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment. When pressed, many educated Christians are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know that it is absurd, so they would much rather not be asked.”

Some who propose to speak for Christianity adopt the same viewpoint. Lutheran theologian and New Testament scholar Rudolph Bultmann declared, “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world.”

Against the backdrop of our modern naturalistic worldview, it’s unsurprising that many today reject miracles out of hand. Yet there are good reasons to spurn this skepticism and to believe that miracles can and do happen. Christianity is founded on miracles (chiefly, the incarnation and resurrection), and if miracles were refuted, Christianity would crumble (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:13–14).

What Is a Miracle?

Before discussing whether miracles are possible, we should first establish what we mean by a miracle. Christian philosopher Robert Larmer’s definition is helpful: “a miracle [is] an unusual and religiously significant event which reveals and furthers God’s purposes, is beyond the power of physical nature to produce in the circumstances in which it occurs, and is caused by an agent who transcends physical nature.”

A couple of things about this definition are worth highlighting. First, if nature is left to itself, a miracle will not occur. Miracles are brought about by transcendent agents—either God or angels. Several biblical passages refer to angels performing miracles (e.g., Matt. 28:2–4; Luke 1:19–20; Acts 5:19–20). Satan can also generate supernatural phenomena (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:9–10), but such actions do not qualify as miracles in this definition.

Second, in addition to being an extraordinary event, a miracle must also, in Larmer’s words, be “an event that has religious significance in the sense that it can reasonably be viewed as furthering God’s purposes.” Jesus’s resurrection, for example, provided evidence of His divine status and authority (John 2:19–22; Acts 17:31). It’s not always immediately clear whether an extraordinary event will further God’s purposes; it sometimes takes time to see what the fruit of the occurrence will be and whether it should ultimately be viewed as a miracle from God.

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We now turn to the question of whether miracles, as defined above, are possible. We can begin by conceding this: If one accepts a naturalistic view of the world, then miracles are extremely improbable. The universe appears to follow physical laws, and we rarely observe phenomena that look like exceptions to the rules. Further, if we did observe something that looked like an exception, that would be evidence that we haven't yet grasped whatever physical mechanism produced it.

On the other hand, if God exists, He is perfectly capable of acting within His creation, and we have good reason to believe that He would do so to interact with his creatures. The one who claims miracles are impossible would have to show that it is impossible that God exists, which is an insurmountably high burden of proof.

Thus, our background assumptions play a decisive role in how we view the question of miracles. If our worldview forbids a transcendent agent from intervening in the world, then we will deny miracles are possible. If, however, we grant that God exists, or may exist, miracles become possible and perhaps likely.

Allowing the possibility of miracles seems to bring up a worry: If we do so, the universe would suddenly become chaotic and unpredictable. Among other things, this would negate scientific study. But as philosopher Richard Purtill points out, we encounter exceptions to general rules all the time, yet these exceptions don't nullify what we ordinarily expect. For example, children sometimes skip grades in school, but this doesn't disrupt the education system. We sometimes have holidays and vacations, but this doesn't interfere with our ability to otherwise work normally. Governors of states can issue occasional pardons, but this doesn't lead to the collapse of the justice system.

Similarly, a miracle can occur without obliterating all that we know and expect about the natural world. Thus, writes Purtill, "Scientists, as such, have no concern with miracles, for they cannot predict them, bring them about, or draw from them any conclusions about the future course of nature. A miracle is supernatural and therefore of no scientific interest."

C.S. Lewis makes the even-stronger point that the best guarantor of the uniformity of nature is God Himself. (We can't pursue this point here, but historians of science have argued that this is the very reason modern science arose only in Christian Europe—because of its belief in a rational God who created a law-abiding world.) Lewis writes in his book *Miracles*:

Theology says to you in effect, "Admit God and with Him the risk of a few miracles, and I in return will ratify your faith in uniformity as regards the overwhelming majority of events" . . . The alternative is really much worse. Try to make Nature absolute and you find that her uniformity is not even probable. By claiming too much, you get nothing . . . Theology offers you a working arrangement, which leaves the scientist free to continue his experiments and the Christian to continue his prayers.

Contrary to Richard Dawkins's assertion above, Christians should feel no embarrassment in affirming the miracles of Scripture, or other bona fide miracles. Given the impossibility of demonstrating God's nonexistence, skeptics ultimately have no grounds for denying that miracles are possible.

A related question naturally arises—whether we have any evidence that miracles have, in fact, happened. Christian scholars have made very strong cases for the historicity of Jesus's resurrection. Interested readers should consult books on the topic by William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, and Michael Licona. For a defense of biblical miracles, along with scores of documented cases of modern-day miracles, two excellent resources are *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* and *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World*, both by Craig S. Keener.

