

## Miracles and Magic - Ancient and Modern

1. The word "miracle" has a broad usage in our culture.
  1. In general, the word is used to describe almost anything that is unusual.
  2. But not all unusual events are supernatural.
  3. Thus, it is necessary to be able to distinguish several kinds of events that are sometimes confused with miracles.
2. Natural Events.
  1. Some natural events are unusual (anomalies) but are still natural events.
  2. A natural event happens in accord with natural law, even if it does not occur at identical intervals (*e.g.*, meteors falling to earth).
  3. Natural law is a description of the way God acts regularly in and through creation (Psa. 104:10-14), whereas a miracle is the way God acts on special occasions.
  4. Thus, both miracles and natural law involve the activity of God.
  5. The difference is that natural law is the regular, repeatable and predictable way God acts, whereas a miracle is not.
  6. Natural law describes the gradual activity of God in the world, whereas miracles manifest his immediate actions.
    1. In this sense, although there is more to it, a miracle is sometimes a speeding up of a natural process.
    2. For example, water turns into wine naturally (gradually) as the rain goes in the soil, up the vine, and into the grape.
    3. It was a miracle, however, when Jesus did it immediately (John 2).
  7. All usual events are natural,, but not all unusual events are supernatural.
    1. At one time some classified hurricanes, tornadoes, meteors, earthquakes, and eclipses as miracles because they had no natural explanation for them.
    2. They were embarrassed when later explanations were found.
  8. How, then, can a miracle be distinguished from an anomaly?
    1. It is not easy in all cases, because some anomalies are irregular or rare, such as eclipses, earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes, not to mention a tsunami.
    2. Though irregular, such events are predictable, at least in theory.
    3. Eclipses are absolutely predictable; hurricanes less so, and tsunamis still less so; however, scientists may increase predictability with increased knowledge.

4. Even where predictability is minimal, the basic mechanism of scientific explanation is knowable.
5. Miracles are absolutely unpredictable and no mechanism is knowable for a miracles since it involves a direct act of God in the world.
6. Supernaturalists should not hold any event to be miraculous unless three criteria are met:

1. It must be an irregular event.
2. It must be at least presently unpredictable.
3. "Divine characteristics must be present.  
(Miracles have theological, moral, doctrinal, and teleological dimensions. They presuppose the existence of God (theological); they bring glory to God in that they manifest the moral character of God (moral); Biblical miracles are connected directly or indirectly with truth claims (doctrinal); Miracles are never meant to entertain, but are intended to glorify God and to provide evidence for people to believe by accrediting the message of God through God's messenger (teleological).

4. Thus we may conclude:

Anomaly	Miracle
Regular event	Not a regular event
Natural Cause	Supernatural cause
Naturally predictable	Not naturally predictable (even in principle)
Has natural mechanism	Has no natural mechanism
No "Divine" characteristics	Has "Divine" Characteristics

### 3. Magic.

1. By magic we refer not to the occult, but to normal illusions and sleight of hand, or trickery.
  1. The only things that miracles and magic have in common is that both are unusual.
  2. Magic is a kind of "wonder."
  3. It is amazing to those who do not know the trick.
  4. Unlike an anomaly, there are known explanations for magical wonders.
2. Unlike miracles, magic as such is amoral.
  1. It does not bring glory to God and there are usually no truth claims associated with it.
  2. If there are supernatural claims they can be exposed by those who know the tricks or by scientific tests to discover the hidden wires or mirrors

that create the illusion.

3. Danny Korem, well known illusionist and investigative reporter, has exposed a number of fraudulent claims to supernatural powers.
  1. One psychic who claimed mental powers to move an object beneath an overturned fish tank on a table was shown to be breathing on the table, the air moving under the tank and moving the fan wheel inside.
  2. A former new age warlock, John Anderson, finally disclosed how he did his so-called new age miracles, including fire walking and psychic surgery.
4. We expect trickery from magicians and even pay them to do it; the tragedy is when religious leaders use trickery to deceive their followers into believing they have miraculous powers.
  1. Jim Jones of poison cool-ade fame is a case in point. It was reported that people who were supposedly dead and "raised" in his services were Jones' close associates in elaborate disguise, each one new for the occasion.
    1. These farces were so carefully contrived that even Jones' photographers and others of his close associates did not realize that they were faked.
    2. It was later discovered that Jones' bus was filled with makeup, wigs, crutches, and fake cancers.
  2. A number of years ago a faith healer in Houston announced that he was going to raise the dead. A man whose name you might recognize decided to attend. He made certain that he arrived early and got a front row seat. When the "corpse" was rolled out, the brother, thinking that he detected breathing, rushed up and "raised" the "corpse" with a pin. He spent a night in jail for this demonstration of power, but the audience, as well as the "corpse," got the point (pun intended).
  3. Magician Andre Kole writes about his experience with a so-called psychic surgeon in the Philippines who supposedly performed incisionless operations.
    1. To the trained eye of a professional magician, however, it didn't take long to discover that the doctor used a very clever form of sleight of hand.
    2. According to Kole, the surgeon performed his operations using some the most clever sleight-of-hand that he had ever seen.
    3. Investigation revealed that the psychic surgeon had used coagulated animal blood from his refrigerator.

4. The removed organs were not human but were from chickens, goats, and cows.
4. Under close scrutiny, psychic claims lose most of their luster.
  1. F.K. Donnelly, then associate professor of history at the University of New Brunswick, reviewed the psychic predictions of psychics in the *People's Almanac* (1975), and discovered that "out of the total of 72 predictions, 66 (92%) were dead wrong. Among the favorites in this category were those that China would go to war with the United States (predicted 4 times) and that New York City would soon be under water (predicted 3 times). My favorite inept prognostication comes from the Berkeley Psychic Institute, which predicted a war between Greenland and the Soviet Union over fish. Since nuclear weapons were to be used, this was to be very sensibly fought in Labrador in May 1977.
  2. For an alleged supernatural power, this is an abysmal record.
  3. As one observed, when the psychics are right almost anyone could make similar predictions.
  4. For example, a number of years ago one psychic predicted that the United States and Russia would continue to be world powers.
5. The "Amazing Randi" made a living at debunking so-called healers.
  1. Randi uncovered the technique used by televangelist Peter Popoff to accomplish his apparent supernatural revelations about members of the audience.
  2. Randi electronically intercepted the radio messages from the preacher's wife to a receiver in her husband's ear.
  3. The information was gathered from conversations with the audience before the meeting and later transmitted during the healing service.
  4. When asked by a Los Angeles television reporter why he employed this method, Popoff replied that he "was told to use this technique by the Holy Spirit."
6. Reports of raising the dead came out of an Indonesian revival reported in 1971.
  1. Mel Tari tells of people who were "raised from the dead" in his book, *A Mighty Wind*.
  2. When George Peters went to Indonesia and carefully sifted through the evidence, he concluded: "I do not doubt that God is able to raise the dead, but I seriously question that He did so in Timor. In fact, I am convinced that it did not happen."

3. Peters interviewed people who were allegedly once dead and others who claimed to have raised the dead; he discovered several things:
  1. Their word for death may mean unconsciousness, coma, or actual death.
  2. Death in that culture was believed to be in three stages. In the first stage the soul is still in the body. In the second stage the soul is in the home or community. In the third stage the soul goes to the spirit world in the regions beyond. But not one of the dead persons believed his soul had completely departed to the region beyond.
  3. Many of the people who claimed to have died could hear people in the room near their body. Others admitted they were not totally dead.
  4. It seems clear from the evidence that these people were not really physically raised from the dead but were only reawakened from a coma-like state or went from an unconscious to a conscious state.
7. Thus we may conclude:

Miracle	Magic
Under God's control	Under Human control
Done at God's will	Done at human will
Not repeatable	Repeatable
No deception involved	Deception involved
Occurs in nature	Does not occur in nature
Fits into nature	Does not fit into nature
Unusual but not odd	Unusual and odd

#### 4. Mental Cures.

1. Psychosomatic cures happen, but they should not be confused with miracles, even if belief in God is part of the cure.
  1. Paul Brand, writing in *Christianity Today* in 1983, gives evidence of the mind's power to heal the body.
    1. The mind can effectively control pain. This can be accomplished by simple mental discipline or by "flooding the gates" of the nervous system with distracting noises or additional sensations.
    2. In the placebo effect, faith in simple sugar pills stimulates the mind to control pain and even heal some disorders. In some experiments among those with terminal cancer, morphine was an effective pain killer in 2/3rds of the patients, but the placebos were equally effective in half of those. The placebo tricks the mind into believing relief has

come, and the body responds accordingly.

3. Through biofeedback, people can train themselves to direct bodily processes that previously were thought involuntary. They can control blood pressure, heart rate, brain waves, and even vary the temperature in their hands by as much as 14 degrees.
  4. Under hypnosis, 20% of patients can be induced to lose consciousness of pain so completely that they can undergo surgery without anesthetics. Some patients have even cured their own warts under hypnosis. The hypnotist suggests the idea, and the body performs a remarkable feat of skin renovation and construction, involving the cooperation of thousands of cells in a mental-directed process not otherwise attainable.
  5. In a false pregnancy, a woman believes so strongly in her pregnant condition that her mind directs an extraordinary sequence of activities: it increases hormone flow, enlarges breasts, suspends menstruation, induces morning sickness, and even prompts labor contractions. All this occurs even though there is no "physical cause"--that is, no fertilization and growing fetus inside.
2. William Nolen explains that it is a known fact that "neurotics and hysterics will frequently be relieved of their symptoms by the suggestions and ministrations of charismatic healers. It is in treating patients of this sort that healers claim their most dramatic triumphs." He adds, "there is nothing miraculous about these cures. Psychiatrists, internists, G.P.'s, any M.D. who does psychiatric therapy, relieve thousands of such patients of their symptoms every year.
  3. Up to 80% of disease is stress-related.
    1. Kenneth Pelletier observed that "one standard medical text estimates that 50-80% of all diseases have their origin in stress."
    2. These emotionally induced diseases can often be reversed by psychological therapy or "faith healings" where the proper mental attitude brings physical healing.
  4. The mind, however, cannot heal everything.
    1. There are some conditions "faith" cannot cure.
    2. In this category are many organic diseases and death itself.
    3. No power of positive thinking can avoid the eventuality of death, raise the dead, see without eyes, grow amputated limbs, or restore those paralyzed by spinal injury.
    4. Nolen explains, "Patients that go to a . . . service paralyzed from the waist down as a result of injury to the spinal cord, never have been

and never will be cured through [faith-healing]."

5. Joni Ereckson Tada is a case in point.
  1. She became a quadriplegic as the result of a swimming accident.
  2. In spite of fervent prayers, she remains unhealed.
  3. Joni concludes that "God certainly can, and sometimes does, heal people in a miraculous way today. But the Bible does not teach that He will always heal those who come to Him in faith. He sovereignly reserves the right to heal or not to heal as He sees fit."
5. Jesus never failed an attempted healing.
  1. Since a miracle is an act of God it is impossible for it to fail.
  2. It is true that Jesus did not always attempt to do a miracle (Matt. 13:58).
  3. Jesus did not always satisfy the fancy of his audience to "cast pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6).
  4. But when God attempts a supernatural event he is always successful.
6. By contrast, psychological attempts to heal are by no means 100% successful.
  1. In fact, there are many kinds of physical problems that are not curable by a patient's "faith."
  2. It has been known for some time that psychological cures are frequent on certain (suggestible) types of personality, such as the hysteronic and hypochondriac.
  3. Some studies show that the vast majority of people in the healing movement have these personality types.
7. Jesus healed a man born blind (John 9) and a man born lame (John 5); the apostles cured a man lame from birth (Acts 3:2); Jesus restored a withered hand (Mark 3:1-5); He calmed the wind (Matt. 8), walked on the water (Mark 6), multiplied bread (John 6), and turned water into wine (John 2).
  1. Psychological healings do not involve any of these kinds of organic conditions or conditions of nature.
  2. They are usually effective only on diseases not involving the loss of bodily organs.
  3. Most often they only aid or speed recovery.
  4. Never do they instantaneously produce a cure of incurable organic diseases or the restoration of limbs.
8. Brand observes flatly that he had "never yet heard an account of miraculous healing of pancreatic cancer or of cystic fibrosis, or of a

major birth defect, or amputation." (*Christianity Today*.)

9. George Bernard Shaw once caustically commented that the healings at Lourdes, France left him unconvinced because he had seen many crutches and wheel chairs on display but not one glass eye, wooden leg, or toupee."
2. Jesus healed people "immediately" (Mark 1:42).
  1. When he spoke there was great calm on the stormy sea.
  2. When the apostles healed the man lame from birth, " immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened" (Acts 3:7).
  3. Even in the case of the two-stage miracle, each stage was accomplished immediately (Mark. 8:22-25).
  4. Miracles produced instantly what nature does only gradually.
  5. Contrary to biblical miracles, when psychological healings do occur immediately they are on psychosomatic kinds of illnesses.
  6. The instantaneous cure of organic and incurable diseases in the name of Christ is a sign of a true miracle (John 9:32).
3. Although God often calls on the recipient to believe, such belief is not a condition for his being able to perform a miracle.
  1. God is in sovereign control of the universe, and he can and does perform miracles with or without our faith.
  2. Miracles are done according to his will (1 Cor. 12:11; Heb. 2:4).
  3. Jesus performed miracles where there was no faith and even where there was unbelief (Matt. 13:58; 17:14-21).
  4. Some recipients could not possibly have believed--they were dead (Matt. 9; Luke 7; John 11).
  5. On the other hand, psychological healings require faith on the part of the recipient.
  6. Those who suffer from psychosomatic illnesses must believe they can be cured.
  7. Whether they believe it is God, a physician, or an evangelist, they must believe to be healed.
  8. But there is nothing supernatural about that kind of healing.
  9. It happens to Buddhists, Hindus, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and atheists.
  10. Healers claiming supernatural powers can do it, but so can psychologists and psychiatrists by purely natural powers and placebo (sugar) pills.
4. Miracles do not require personal contact.
  1. Many whom Jesus never touched were healed.



2. Jesus raised the nobleman's son from the dead from a long distance away (John 4:50-54).
3. Jesus never touched Lazarus when he brought him back to life (John 11:43-44).
4. Jesus performed other healings for people who were not even present (John 4:49-53).
5. Many faith healings depend on the laying on of hands or some other physical contact or personal influence.
  1. Some healers used prayer cloths.
  2. Some ask listeners to touch the radio or the television.
  3. The personal contact--or at least the psychological build-up--seem to be conditional to the healing itself.
5. Biblical miracles lasted; there were no relapses.
  1. When Jesus healed a disease it did not return.
  2. Of course, everyone eventually died, even those whom He raised from the dead, but this was only because of the natural process of mortality, not because the miracle was reversed.
  3. When Jesus performed a miracle, it lasted.
  4. Whatever other eventual problems the body had, it was not because that miracle did not immediately and permanently repair that particular problem.
  5. On the other hand, psychological cures do not always last.
    1. This is true whether they are induced by hypnotism, placebo pills, or faith healers.
    2. When I was a teenager a group of us went to a faith healing service. During the service a man who was blind in one eye and deaf was "healed." I saw him the next day at the clothing store where I worked after school. He was looking in the window at a shirt on which the price was posted with large letters. He called me out to read it to him, and I had to repeat it loudly before he heard it.
6. We may conclude:

Supernatural Healings	Psychological Healings
Always immediate	Often not immediate
Don't require personal contact	Often require personal contact
Don't require faith	Require faith
Always successful	Not always successful
Have no relapses	Have many relapses
On all kinds of diseases	Not on all kinds of diseases

(including organic ones)

(usually only nonorganic ones)

## 5. Demonic Signs.

1. The same biblical words used of divine miracles are sometimes used of demonic signs.
  1. While these satanic signs are not true miracles, there is no reason to deny they have a supernatural spiritual source.
  2. If a miracle is an act of God that brings glory to God and good to the world, then of course a demonic act is not a miracle.
  3. On the other hand, if we are going to believe in acts of God on the basis of the biblical record, then on this same basis we ought to believe that there are evil spirit beings who can perform highly unusual acts that the Bible calls false "signs" and "wonders."
2. If, then, there are two sources for unusual "signs" in the world, how can we tell them apart?
  1. In brief, God's signs are God-like, and Satan's signs are Satan like.
  2. More specifically, the answer involves several "tests" (1 John 4:1) that the believer is urged to apply, all of which amount to saying that satanic "signs" have satanic (evil) characteristics and divine miracles have God-like (good) characteristics.
  3. Numerous evil indicators are mentioned in the Bible, such as idolatry (1 Cor. 10:20), immorality (Eph. 2:2), divination (Deut. 18:22), occult activity (Deut. 18:14), worshipping others gods (Deut. 13:1-2), deceptive activity (2 Thess. 2:9), contacting the dead (Deut. 18:11-12), messages contrary to those revealed through the true prophets of God (Gal. 1:8), and prophecies that do not center on Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:10; see also Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; John 5:39; Heb. 10:7).
  4. And, as with any other counterfeit and deception, we must know the characteristics of good and evil and then look carefully to see which are connected with the unusual event.
3. Whenever there was any serious question in the Bible as to which events were of God, a contest followed in which good triumphed over evil by an even greater miracle than the magic or satanic signs.
  1. Moses and the Egyptian magicians (Exodus 8:18-19).
  2. Dispute between Moses and Korah (Num 16).
  3. Contest between Elijah and Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18).
4. When necessary the supreme God proves himself supreme.
  1. Only God is infinite in power; Satan is finite in power.
  2. Only God can create life and raise the dead.

3. At best Satan only counterfeits attempts to do so.
4. Satan is the master magician and the superscientist.
5. With his vast knowledge and deceptive ability he is able to convince many that he can do what God does, but he cannot.
6. God never relinquishes his sovereign control of the universe; Satan only works by God's permission (Job 1:10-12).

7. In brief, a true miracle and a satanic sign differ in the following ways:

Divine Miracle	Satanic Sign
Supernatural	Supernormal
By an infinite spiritual power	By a finite spiritual power
Connected with truth	Connected with error
Associated with good	Associated with evil
Never associated with the occult	Often associated with the occult
Always successful	Not always successful

## 6. Acts of Special Providence.

1. Not all "acts of God" are miracles.

1. In nature God acts regularly; through miracles he acts rarely.
2. But not all rare acts are miracles.
3. There are also anomalies and special acts of providence.
4. The latter is like an anomaly of nature in that it is an unusual event within nature.
5. That is, it happens only rarely.
6. Likewise, neither anomalies nor special providence involve an exception to any natural laws, such as walking on water, turning water into wine, and raising the dead.
7. God simply uses his knowledge of nature in such a way as to accomplish unusual events for his purposes.

2. God is active in general providence by his sustenance of the natural world.

1. It is God who sends the rain, makes the grass grow, and feeds his creatures (Ps. 104).
2. General providence is simply a theological way of describing how God works through natural laws.
3. Or, more properly, what we call "natural laws" involve the way God works regularly in his creation.

3. God also works through special providence, which is different from both general providence and miracles.

1. Unlike general providence, there is something unusual about a special

act of providence.

2. It does not happen every day, and when it does it makes us sit up and take notice.
3. On the other hand, a special act of God's providence is not a miracle.
4. The most crucial difference is that a miracle is never the product of a natural law, but special providence is.
5. Special providence simply utilizes natural laws to produce an unusual effect.
4. Another way to state the difference is that special providence is accomplished by God's prearranging of natural events, but a miracle is a direct intervention into the natural world.
  1. A miracle, then, involves God's direct action in the world in a special way, whereas in special providence God acts only indirectly through natural laws.
  2. For example, Jesus walking on water was a miracle, but the fog at Normandy during the landing of Allied troops in World War II was a special act of God's providence.
  3. Without the cover of fog, the troops would have suffered heavy casualties and possibly Hitler's tyranny would not have been overthrown.
  4. But while the Allied troops walked through the protecting fog, none of them walked on the water.
5. Much of what we call miracles today in common parlance is simply God's special providence.
  1. Legitimate healings in response to prayer fit into this category.
  2. There may be spontaneous remissions or recessions of the same illness where no prayer was given.
  3. Nonetheless, if the event is rare enough and the timing is significant enough, it may very well be a special act of God's providence.
  4. But in such a case, God superseded no natural law but simply used his infinite knowledge to preplan things in such a way as to bring about this truly amazing event.
6. Of course, from a spiritual perspective, it matters little how God accomplishes his unusual feats--whether by miracles or special providence.
  1. He nevertheless deserves the praise.
  2. We should not over-claim.
  3. A special answer to prayer is just that--a special answer to prayer.
  4. We should not exaggerate the situation by placing it on the same level as the miracles of Jesus and the apostles.

5. The Bible says the apostles had special "signs" (2 Cor. 12:12) that God gave them for a special purpose (Acts 2:22; Heb. 2:3-4).
7. The differences may be outlined as follows:

Miracle	Special Providence
Natural law is superseded	Natural law is not superseded
Goes beyond nature	Works through nature
Divine intervention in nature	Divine prearranging of nature
God's direct activity in the world	God's indirect activity in the world