

1 **Jesus and Miracles**

- Module: Jesus
- Lesson 42

2 **Some Recommended Sources**

- Norman Geisler, Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics, "Miracles in the Bible"
- Erick Metaxas, Miracles
- William Lane Craig, On Guard
- Reasonable Faith vlog, "When is it Rational to Believe in Miracles?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vx2d-SOaP-s>
- Craig Keener, Miracles (2 vol.)
- Michael Licona, The Resurrection of Jesus
- William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith

3 **Key Questions About Jesus and Miracles**

- Are miracles crucial to our understanding of Jesus?
- Are miracles actually possible?
- Did Jesus perform the miracles attributed to him?

4 **What Is A Miracle?**

- A miracle is an extraordinary event which natural causes cannot produce at that time and place, and which occurs in a religio-historical context. (i.e. A naturally impossible event occurring in a religiously charged historical context.)
- Biblically, miracles are associated with the idea of "signs." They are acts of "power" which in the religio/historical context signify something on the part of the miracle worker to those observing or experiencing the miracle/sign.
- [See lesson # 29, Science and Miracles, for an in depth consideration of alternative naturalistic definition of a miracle.]

5 **Two Key Elements of the Definition**

- An extraordinary event occurs which natural processes, operating under the laws of nature, could not bring about.
 - Given the laws of nature, or the natural behavior of things, the event is extremely unlikely or impossible to have occurred.
 - There is no reasonable natural explanation for the event.
- Such an event (as in #1) occurs within a certain context.
 - The Greek word for miracle means a "sign."
 - A charged religious context.
 - "A miracle without a context is inherently ambiguous." (William Lane Craig)
 - e. g. The resurrection is considered a miracle in part because it occurred in the context of Jesus' unique self-claims and the spiritual milieu in which it happened.

6 Why Jesus Performed Miracles

- Jesus performed miracles in order to demonstrate the validity of his Messianic and Divine claims about himself.
- “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” (Matt. 11:2-5)
 - “In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.” (Isa. 29:18, 19)
- “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— ‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.’” (Mark 2:9-11)

7 Are Miracles Possible?

- On the anti-supernaturalist bias against miracles—
 - If there is no god, then there can be no miracles.
 - If there is a God, then there is no reason to preclude the possibility of miracles.
 - “A purely naturalistic paradigm that a priori excludes the possibility of divine causation is not the only interpretive approach to reality by intelligent people in all cultures, nor is it self-evident to observers in all cultures.” (Craig Keener, Miracles, p. 97)

8 Miracles and Natural Law

- Laws of nature are a description of the regularity of nature which we observe.
- If nature is all there is, then one might expect nothing to occur other than in accordance with the laws of nature.
- If there is a transcendent God beyond nature, who purposely created nature and its regularity, then we should expect the regularity of nature in most situations.
- Yet there is no reason to assume God would not or could not, at times, have reasons to influence events by temporarily acting outside the regularity of nature to accomplish a specific divine purpose.
- If we have sufficient reason to believe in God, as traditionally defined, then we have every justification to believe in miracles should the evidence warrant it.

9 Bart Ehrman’s Arguments Against Jesus’ Miracles

- The Gospels are poor sources of evidence for miracles.
- The improbability of miracles. (By definition, according to Ehrman, a miracle is always the most improbable explanation.)

- The conclusion of miraculous occurrences associated w/Jesus (e.g. his resurrection) is a theological one, not a historical one, so the reports of miracles in the N. T. cannot be given historical consideration.
- The canons of historical research do not allow historians to consider miracle claims.
- If one accepts the N. T. miracle claims, one would have to concede all miracle claims.

10 Answering Bart Ehrman's Arguments

- As we have seen, the Gospel sources are actually quite reliable as a historical record, and the miracle accounts cannot be differentiated from the history.
 - "So central are miracle reports to the Gospels that one could remove them only if one regarded the Gospels as preserving barely any genuine information about Jesus." (Keener)
- Ehrman's assertion regarding improbability fails to account for external agent causation.
 - Probability assertions call into consideration Bayes Theorem. Assertions regarding the probability of miracles vis-a-vis other explanations must take into account the probability of God's existence and purposes.
 - Philosophically Ehrman's argument illegitimately equates frequency with probability; that something that happens only once is thereby improbable. (Many probable events have occurred only once.)
- He confuses historical conclusions (e.g. that an event occurred for which there is no reasonable natural causal explanation) with theological implications (that, given the religious context, supernatural agent causation is the best explanation).

11 Answering Bart Ehrman's Arguments

- His claimed "historical canons" do not exist. He is imposing a strict naturalist restriction (methodological naturalism) on historical studies that is not warranted.
 - "From the conventional historiographic standpoint, the issue for the Gospels and Acts is simply whether eyewitnesses can claim such events (for which the answer must be a decisive yes) rather than resolving the nature of causation." -Craig Keener-
- Two problems with his argument re: other miracle claims:
 - We have no reason to insist that God would never act supernaturally in the lives of those who practice other religions, nor to preclude the possibility of the agency of other non-material beings (demons, etc.).
 - There is no reason to believe that all miracle claims are of equal merit.

12 What Constitutes Evidence for a Miracle?

- A common claim made by skeptics: "An extraordinary event calls for extraordinary evidence."
 - What is most likely meant by this is that there must be an extraordinary amount or kind of evidence.
- What is really necessary to establish the occurrence of a miracle?

- It is more likely that the evidence we possess regarding an event would exist if a miraculous event occurred, than that it would exist if a miraculous event had not occurred.

13 What Constitutes Evidence for a Miracle?

- Explanation:
 - One possesses a certain collection of data (evidence) regarding the occurrence of a supposed miracle. (e.g. the data: congenital blindness is incurable, a man with congenital blindness encounters Jesus. Jesus commanded the man to see. The man was immediately able to see.)
 - Given the data one possess:
 - (1) What is the probability that the data (e.g. incurability of congenital blindness, witnesses to the man's congenital blindness [his parents], witnesses to his immediate restoration of sight) would exist if a miracle occurred,
 - compared to
 - (2) the probability that same data would exist if a miracle had not occurred?
 - If the probability of (1) is greater than (2), then it is more likely the miracle occurred than that it did not. As the probability that (1) is greater than (2) increases, the greater the likelihood the miracle occurred.

14 Criteria for Identifying a Miracle

- The evidence for it is at least as good as it is for other acceptable but unusual events similarly distant in time and space.
- There is little or no evidence that one or more natural agents could have produced the evidence. (i.e. A natural account for the evidence would be unlikely, clumsy, or ad hoc.)
- There is some justification for a supernatural interpretation of the evidence. (the religious/historical context)
- Hence: the defender of a miracle claim need not prove (in some absolute sense) that a miracle occurred, but merely show it is a more plausible or more probable explanation of the evidence than any natural explanation of the event.

15 Widespread Experience of Miracles

- From Craig Keener's voluminous research on miracles. (Craig Keener, *Miracles*, 2 vol., (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011))
 - Millions of people throughout history and across the world have reported witnessing or experiencing miracles which meet the criteria for detecting a miraculous event. (Contra Hume's claim of "universal human experience" that no one has ever experienced a miracle.)
 - The modern era, up to and including the most recent years, includes thousands of credible known miracle claims. These include healings, raising of the dead, and nature miracles. Many healings include modern medical documentation and/or the testimony of medical doctors.

- Thousands of credible known miracle claims come from all regions of the world—the Majority World as well as the Western World.
 - Even in the West, where a strong naturalist bias against the possibility of miracles exists, Keener discovered many, many documented miracle reports.
- Though more prevalent among Pentecostal Christians across the world, non-Pentecostal Christians, as well as many non-believers report miraculous experiences.

16 **Historians and the Miracles of Jesus**

- The Quest for the Historical Jesus failed due to the impossibility of separating the miracle accounts in the Gospels from the acknowledged historical record.
- Historians today are increasingly accepting the New Testament miracle accounts as in some way being historically authentic.
 - None of the ancient non-Christian historical sources re:Jesus' miracles attempted to deny that they occurred.
 - Keener lists several leading non-Christian historians who acknowledge the historical authenticity of the miracle accounts. (E. P. Sanders, Geza Vermes, John Meier, Raymond Brown, Otto Betz, Morton Smith):
 - "Most scholars today working on the subject thus accept the claim that Jesus was a healer and and exorcist." (Keener, V1, p 23)
 - "It is thus not surprising that most scholars publishing historical research about Jesus today grant that Jesus was a miracle worker, regardless of their varying philosophic assumptions about divine activity in miracle claims." (Keener, V1, p 25)
 - John Meier, preeminent historical Jesus scholar: "[Jesus as a miracle worker] has as much historical corroboration as almost any other statement we can make about the Jesus of history."

17 **Review**

- A miracle is an extraordinary event for which there is no reasonable natural explanation and which occurs in a religious/historical context that points to divine activity.
- If there is a theistic God, then miracles are possible. Only a naturalistic worldview precludes the possibility of miracles.
- Most historians today studying and publishing about Jesus accept that Jesus was a miracle worker.
- Miracles play a central and non-negotiable role in understanding who Jesus is. Jesus' purpose in performing miracles was so that we might know who he is.
- Jesus backed up his messianic and divine claims with many miracles and exorcisms.
 - Healing miracles. (authority over disease and death)
 - Nature miracles (authority over nature/cosmos)

- Exorcisms (authority over the spiritual realm)
- His greatest miracle—resurrection (authority over sin and death)

18  **Next Week:**

- The Death Jesus Died