Do Miracles Happen Today?

by

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Has anyone recovered immediately after words of prayer or even commands of healing have been spoken? It is time to investigate this and apply the results to philosophical and theological arguments. That is the goal of this article.

The last three articles in this series, on Hume’s miracle prison and its fortification, have the goal of keeping the prison door to miracles open. If one keeps the door closed so that miracles are not a genuine option or real possibility, then this begs the question always in favor of the closed system of naturalism. This is unfair and prejudicial. The allegedly closed natural system of cause and effect (e.g. talking causes sound) that we live in offers no guarantees from divine action.

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), agrees, apparently. He says in his essay on miracles (Section X) in his book *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, that “if a person claiming divine authority should command a sick person to be well . . . which immediately follow upon his command, [this] might justly be esteemed [a miracle]” (p. 115, note 1). This leaves the prison door to miracles open.

So let’s search for hard evidence of miracles today.

Historical context

The historical context of the reports of miracles is important. The Pentecostal Movement began in various regions around the globe, such as America, Germany, and Australia, in the early twentieth century. The Charismatic Renewal began in the last third of the same century. (The healing movement in the 1940s and 1950s is omitted in this brief survey.) Both the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, even today, benefit and learn from each other; indeed, the Charismatic Renewal grew, in part, out of Pentecostalism and expanded beyond the earlier movement’s church borders. Influenced thus, many churches small or large around the globe have sprung up rapidly. They provide a spiritual environment for miracles to happen.

Testimonies of miracles today

This passage, representing other summaries, encapsulates in a few words the healing ministry of Jesus in Israel, several decades prior to the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70:
30 Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. 31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. (Matt. 15:30-31)

That passage assumes that the power of God (Luke 6:19) is real and heals the infirm. “And they praised the God of Israel.”

A small, representative sample of miracles today follows:

1. Robert A. Larmer, professor of philosophy at University of New Brunswick, offers this testimony: . . . “For example, my minister [of a charismatic church], whom I know to be of good character and judgment, tells me that his father experienced an overnight recovery from the last stages of cancer that has been diagnosed as terminal by a number of doctors, and . . . his report is confirmed by a large number of people acquainted with his father” . . . ("Miracles and Testimony," p. 130)

2. A woman in my own church tells a similar story. The CT scan showed that she had cancer, but in the early stages. After prayer, the next CT scan showed the cancer disappeared. A misdiagnosis? The oncologist would disagree.

3. The senior pastor of my church was a businessman before he went into ministry. One of his employees injured her leg. He asked permission to pray for it, and she allowed him. Immediately, she could walk normally. This was done in private without cameras or a charged up atmosphere, though an exciting atmosphere of a large conference on healing is perfectly legitimate.

4. An associate pastor of my church tells a similar story. As he was going out of a restaurant, a man walking with crutches was coming into the restaurant. The pastor, though not knowing the man, asked permission to pray for him, and the injured man, somewhat surprised, allowed it. After praying for him and exchanging pleasantries, the pastor left, walking toward his car. As he was driving away, he noticed the man outside the restaurant, carrying his crutches, waving them triumphantly and indicating that he no longer needed them. Evidently, the man was healed. This happened without cameras or a charged up atmosphere, though an exciting atmosphere of a large conference on healing is legitimate.

The following miracles are found in D. C. Lewis’s book Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact? Lewis has a PhD in Social Anthropology. He is a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He conducted research on the Harrogate Conference (England) in the autumn of 1986, led by John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Churches. Some 2,470 people attended, and 1,890 returned a questionnaire. One hundred were chosen at random, and they were followed up for a period of six months to over a year. The scientific method in the social sciences was carefully followed throughout Lewis’ investigation (pp. 15-16; and see Appendix A).

5. In investigating the claimed healings during the follow-ups, someone (an “informant”) reports after receiving prayer: “My left hip was alright for some
months, when I felt pain coming again . . . So I asked some brothers to pray for me for a second time. Since then I do not feel any more pain in my left hip)” (p. 25).

6. In another follow-up, an “informant” wrote regarding his or her total healing of a hernia after prayer: “I have never had any trouble with the hernia whatsoever” (p. 25).

7. One man wrote on the questionnaire about his twisted ankle. “After prayer, the pain was gone! I tried to make it come back by twisting to what would have been uncomfortable but it was OK . . . Talk about stunned.” Fifteen months later he wrote: “I’ve had no problems with the ankle since the healing. I’ve tested this out with various sports like squash, badminton and some running without any reaction” (p. 26).

8. A nurse reports that “the physical healing I received for my old prolapsed disc injury was complete for about seven months. I was totally pain free and unrestricted in movement and/or exercise and stress related activities.” However, she reinjured it after an overweight patient shifted her weight onto the nurse when she was lifting the patient (p. 26).

9. It is difficult to measure a leg lengthening when it grows out by a half an inch, even if God works a miracle. It could be attributed to natural processes. However, this report says that someone’s leg was lengthened by an inch-and-a-half, during the process of prayer. “We prayed for my leg; I watched the leg come level with my right leg and even heard it grow—like breaking wood. I could not walk right for twenty years . . . I didn’t wear a built-up shoe, just limped . . . They prayed for my hip to come back to the position it should be—I feel it has. For the first time in twenty-one years I can walk without discomfort or pain, it seems level to me” (p. 38).

10. A woman complained of extra-sensitive teeth. Cold air or hot tea caused a lot of pain. Her written report on her healing is lengthy, but in the end, her dentist wrote on August 18, 1987: “Routine dental check up. Patient no longer complains of sensitive teeth” (p. 40).

11. In a case outside of the Wimber conference, Lewis reports total blindness being healed. An article in the November / December 1988 issue of Prophecy Today says that “twenty-three-year old Christine Newton from Durham who was born blind but after receiving prayer for healing ‘felt her eyeballs grow and when she opened her eyes she could see—for the first time in her life! . . . At first her sight was dim, but it has become gradually clearer each day. Now she is learning to read and write’” (p. 288, Appendix C).

12. In an earlier conference at Sheffield, England, led by John Wimber, a man was healed of acute insomnia and his wife was healed of deafness. These cases lie outside of Lewis’ study of the Harrogate conference, so he includes them in Appendix C. He writes: “However, because they were written at least a year after the events described they do provide some further evidence of the persistence of physical healings . . . it seems difficult to attribute the healings to known medical processes” (p. 289). The patient reports on his prayer session with two American youths, who irritated him with their casual attitude and gum chewing. He slept well that night, but attributed it to a “real tiredness.” Then he reports:
The next day my wife was prayed for, for deafness. She was instantly healed! That night, having gone to bed, she awoke me at approximately 1:30 a.m. I was rather irritated, as from past experience the chances of returning to sleep for me were rather slim. “What’s wrong with you?” I asked. She said that she couldn’t sleep because she could hear the alarm clock ticking!! She then reminded me I was healed. I resumed sleep, and have had only one night in the past year when I have not slept well. PS: My wife still has problems with hearing too much at night! (pp. 289-90, Appendix C)

A proper perspective

It should be pointed out that these reports in Lewis’ book indicate total healing. The fuller investigation shows, however, that sometimes healings did not occur even though prayers were offered. In other cases the patients showed a little or some improvement. (Why these variations happen is another article entirely.) Also, the last eight miracles were investigated and written up in the mid-1980s. But I have heard countless testimonies of miracles from nameless, reliable witnesses who want no public attention or fame or fortune. They report that the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and cancer vanishes—the list could go on. Indeed, I have witnessed such miracles with my own eyes.

Next, those miracles are not only about an inner personal experience that no one can verify empirically and that everyone can claim. Rather, they can be followed up and examined.

Further, it is true that public charlatans and quacks manipulate people and claim miracles where none occur. But it is equally true that genuine miracles happen, though they are often behind the scenes. It would be prejudicial to dismiss all miracles because of some forgeries, as Hume does in his countless examples of fakes and frauds to indict all miracles. This repeats the Pyrrhonist fallacy that says that because some accounts of miracles can be dismissed, all accounts can be dismissed (Larmer, Water into Wine? p. 122).

What about psychosomatic healings? Sometimes this is true. A patient feels bitter about an unpleasant experience from years ago, and he holds a grudge that eats away at him. Lewis records one or two of such healings. However, the miracles in the list above have nothing to do with psychosomatic illness and healing. A leg really did grow out, but not because of some released bitterness. Extra-sensitive teeth really did stop hurting, without a psychological healing coming before the physical healing.

Finally, those miracles listed above are found in a moral and religious context. This means that they cannot be disregarded out of hand as obscure, bizarre anomalies. This is the problem with Hume’s hypothetical account of Queen Elizabeth’s revivification. It has no religious context, and nor was the miracle done by a devout, holy, and great moral person. It was a fluke. This is different from the miracles done
by Jesus. The context is important in interpreting miracles as opposed to strange, random occurrences (Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, p. 147).

**An atmosphere of faith**

It is prejudicial to disbelieve in miracles because they occur in an atmosphere of belief. For example, Hume says that when the spirit of religion joins itself to the love of miracles, therefore, people of religion naturally or have a propensity to believe such things (p. 117). Next, “a religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality” (p. 117). Or an eloquent speaker may manipulate the masses (p. 118).

In reply, however, skeptics do not get the privilege of setting the rules of the game. Miracles happen wherever faith and God’s presence are found. If people come together in a conference, expecting God to “show up,” so to speak, then so be it. Plus, Pastor Wimber avoided hype and hoopla. He never shouted and shrieked, whipping people up into a frenzied or ecstatic state of “enthusiasm” (a favorite derisory word of Enlightenment thinkers like Hume and Voltaire). Wimber’s ministry was known for its “laid-back California” style.

Also, many miracles, such as the first four listed above, occur behind the scenes, without the cameras running or appeals for money thundering out from the “faith healer.” Ordinary people pray and see miracles with their own eyes. Such unsung heroes of the faith derive no material benefit.

**Miracles and “primitive” people**

Hume says that (alleged) miracles are prone to happen among primitive and “barbarous” people (pp. 119-21). In one sense he is right, yet in another he is wrong.

He is right because the so-called primitive people have not been educated in western philosophy, so they may have more faith than the average Westerner, to the credit of the “primitives.” Yet, these miracles listed above happened in the West, in Hume’s own neighborhood, England (he was Scottish) during the age of science and technology, which Hume could only dream about. This is another reason why the miracles listed above were selected. They happen wherever people have childlike faith, whether in the first world or developing world.

However, Hume was wrong to express such regional centrism, but we should not fault him too much for this because he lived in the wrong century. The worldwide web and satellite has shrunk the world down to nearly nothing. A miracle can be filmed, uploaded to a satellite, beamed across the globe, and transmitted to our television in a few seconds. Or a film clip of it can fly around the web. The concept “primitive,” though not vanishing completely yet, is becoming obsolete, particularly the concept of “barbarity,” as social scientists may have used it in the past.

See James Rutz’ book *Megashift* that tracks down miracles around the globe. He has URLs or web links to reports and photos of some of them. He has some accounts of
Recognizing miracles

Anthony Flew, who has strengthened Hume’s skepticism about miracles, writes:

We simply do not have, and could not have [note the words], any natural (as opposed to revealed) criterion which enables us to say, when faced with something which is found to have actually happened, that here we have an achievement which nature, left to her own unaided devices, could never encompass. The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden. (“Miracles,” p. 349)

It is true that some miracles may be hard to detect. My favorite says God helped a driver find an ideal parking place. But this can be attributed to coincidence. With that acknowledgement given, however, Flew’s claim about the unrecognizability of miracles is largely a strange idea in his Encyclopedia article. Humans cannot have any natural criteria to recognize miracles? His assertion seems to be pulled out of thin air, or maybe he is thinking of stories about the Bermuda triangle or images of Jesus appearing in deep-fried tortillas. But believers or skeptics can indeed recognize some miracles.

If a woman who was completely blind from birth or a man who has one leg much shorter than the other recovers completely (the first can see and the second can walk normally), then the results would be clear to a child. It is incumbent on the skeptic to overturn this recognition that even a child has. How can a skeptic attribute their recoveries to all-encompassing nature?

One miracle not listed here occurred in Russia, after prayer from an American. A little girl was paralyzed in her arms shortly after her birth. After prayer, she recovered the use of her arms. A doctor who knew of her two distinct conditions before and after prayer confirmed all of this. Photos were taken of her chasing and blowing out soap bubbles, waving her arms excitedly (Rutz, p. 23).

Curiously, the burden of proof for an all-powerful nature now shifts over to the skeptics. It seems they fall prey to the anything-but-God explanation, the corollary opposite of the God- of-the-gaps, which invokes a miracle whenever a difficult or unsolvable problem comes up. For my part, however, I believe the little girl.
Repeated study of miracles

Flew writes the following about a long-past historical event (read: an alleged miracle of the Bible), contrasting it with the laws of nature that operate consistently regardless of the period of time:

The candidate historical proposition will be particular, often singular, and in the past tense . . . by reason of this very pastness and particularity it is no longer possible to examine the subject directly for himself . . . The “law of nature” will, unlike the candidate historical proposition, be a general nomological [law-like generalization]. It can thus be tested at any time by any person. (Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief*, pp. 207-08)

In reply, however, miracles today can be studied over and over again. A scientific observer like D. C. Lewis can watch a prayer being offered for blind eyes. He can watch the blind eyes see after prayer. The patient can get a check up with an opthalmologist who knows that the patient was blind. The observer can verify the results.

A scientific observer may not need to investigate one patient again and again, after the evidence is complete, but theoretically he can do this. Indeed, Lewis sometimes waited for over a year before he investigated, even though he attended the conference at Harrogate. This places the miracles in the past, and they are investigable over an extended period and repeatedly. Such past miracles may have as much or more evidence than the evidence for a past natural event recorded in the history books.

Also, if an observer is satisfied that the evidence for a miracle is strong and complete, then he can investigate another miracle today, such as a total healing of deafness. He can repeat the scientific process for as many miracles as may happen.

Do miracles violate the laws of nature?

The answer is no. As I noted in the article “Hume’s Miracle Prison,” if a prison warden allows a concert in chapel, then he commits no violation or transgression of the rules. He calls for them within the limits of his own authority. But if a lone guard does this for his own purposes and without permission, then this would be a violation or transgression because he does not act as a rightful authority.

The existence of God lifts the analogy beyond the human level. More than a warden, God does not violate or transgress anything of his creation when miracles occur, because he is the final authority over it. God inserts a new factor (miracle) and then nature accommodates it. As C. S. Lewis says (see the previous link), miraculous wine still intoxicates, miraculous bread is still digested and nourishing, and a miraculous conception still has to go through nine months of pregnancy and then a painful birth. Normal, natural processes say, “If A, then B.” A miracle says, “If A2, then B2.”
See Kreeft and Tacelli, pp. 111-12, who use the example of a high school principal and a gym teacher.

Definition of miracles

Theologically, a miracle may be defined as God’s (or his agent’s) intervention, introduction, or insertion of a new condition or factor that would otherwise be impossible naturally. (Cf. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, p. 144)

A more specific definition reads:

> A miracle is a less common kind of God’s activity in which he arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself. (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 355)

The words “less common” implies that God sustains and governs the universe, but specific miracles such as those found in Scripture or the healings in the list, above, do not happen as often or are “less common” than his constant governance.

As noted, such miracles take place in a religious context, so they are not bizarre anomalies. Such miracles often take place after prayer—even a one-word prayer of “help!” Miracles of healing, for example, eliminate abnormalities attacking human health.

Some theologians have called the abnormalities parasites attached to the good (health). These destructive conditions describe evil perfectly. However, healing miracles purge out or destroy or correct debilitating conditions, such as shrinking tumors to nothing, repairing bent and dislocated bones, and restoring sight and hearing, to cite only these examples.

It is true that modern medical treatments like chemo-therapy can destroy cancer cells, for example (and there is nothing wrong with seeking medical attention), but miracles of divine healing take on a new dimension of God’s intervention coinciding with prayer, as we have seen in the examples listed above. As Dr. Lewis rightly concludes from his observations, many miracles he witnessed and researched cannot be attributed to natural processes alone or at all.

Theologically speaking, a miracle is not a violation or transgression of the laws of nature, even if it destroys a metastasized tumor or cancer cells, which are abnormalities in human health. It does not violate or transgress God’s laws even if Jesus turns water into wine or walks on water. Instead, it inserts new material conditions to which the laws of nature apply (See Larmer, *Water into Wine?* pp. 3-30, though he may not agree entirely with my own conclusions).

More importantly, the words “violation” and transgression” have a negative, even criminal connotation. Therefore, nor is a miracle an intrusion or in-breaking in the sense of capriciousness or burglary even, but in the positive sense of rescuing. God as hero saves us, perhaps at the last minute. He is not capricious, for his character is
good, and he acts with purpose, even if we do not or cannot come to know it; we have a limited epistemic point of view. Nonetheless, he is free to walk onto his own property (the universe), so to speak, without violating or transgressing any of his own laws—the very laws he created. Therefore, contrary to the conclusions of some Enlightenment thinkers, God’s actions in the world are positive and redemptive. They show his love for people without violating or transgressing any of his own laws, as if he were a home invader or a rapist of Mother Nature.

Maybe the question over terms concerns the point of view of the investigator. From a non-theistic point of view, specifically one that holds that nature is all that exists, the Only Fact, “violation” seems an apt description of a miracle. However, the whole concept of miracle is framed wrongly from the outset with those images and words denoting criminality—from a theistic point of view. In fact, Christians who understand the Bible believe that the universe will not last forever because God will exercise his right even to destroy part of his creation and make another one or to renew parts of the first (Matt. 24:35; Heb. 12:27; 2 Pet. 3:10). So if he destroys cells that are abnormal to human health, then this action is minor, when contrasted with his rights over his entire creation in the Last Days. God owns it, so he gives himself permission to renovate it, to improve—redeem—it. Thankfully, he gives himself permission to renew the human body at times by eliminating abnormalities, such as diseases, and by restoring normality to such impairments as dislocated bones, dysfunctional limbs, and non-functioning eyes and ears—all working normally after miracles are effectuated. But the laws of nature will have their way, as he ordains them. Even a person completely healed of cancer will die eventually.

In any case, we need the right point of view, as much as this is possible. And one that introduces God (as traditional theism understands him) into the discussion can offer no guarantee that he will not act according to his own rules and decrees, out of his good character, even if we do not fully have the mental capacity to understand every aspect of his actions and purposes and character.

**Philosophical significance of miracles**

(1) Miracles taking place today may tip the scales of probability slightly towards miracles in philosophical arguments. The miracles listed above—only representative—work together toward a convergence of probabilities or at least possibilities. That is, these miracles can add up and converge to make the possibility or probability of the reality of miracles strong.

Surely they make even a hardened skeptic pause to reflect. What if it’s all true?

(2) Miracles happening today do not upset science or the regular laws of nature. In fact, increasing miracles exponentially would do nothing to tear the fabric of nature. There are still far too few miracles, and would that they increase! Even under those happy conditions, science would still sit securely. C. S. Lewis rightly says that theology offers a working arrangement between science and a Christian’s prayers.
The philosophy that forbids you to make uniformity absolute is also the philosophy which offers you solid grounds for believing it to be general, to be *almost* absolute. The Being who threatens Nature’s claim to omnipotence confirms her in her lawful occasions . . . Try to make nature absolute and you find that her uniformity is not even probable. By claiming too much you get nothing. You get the deadlock, as in Hume. Theology offers you a working arrangement, which leaves the scientist free to continue his experiments and the Christian to continue his prayers. (p. 140)

(3) Rather than eliminate the possibility of miracles, one must keep an open mind. In *The Concept of Miracle* (p. 71), prominent theistic philosopher Richard Swinburne describes two starting points before anyone investigates the reports of miracles.

The first starting point is open and receptive.

> It should now be apparent that the evidence for or against the occurrence of some particular miracle is extremely widespread. With one [worldview] one rightly does not ask much in the way of detailed historical evidence for a miracle since miracles are the kind of events which one expects to occur in many or certain specific circumstances. The testimony of one witness . . . should be sufficient . . .

The second starting point is skeptical.

> With another [worldview] one rightly asks for a large amount of historical evidence, because one’s general conviction that the world is a certain sort of world, a world without a god and so a world in which miracles do not happen.

What is your, the reader’s, starting point?

(4) It is incumbent on all skeptics to investigate. (The meaning of *skepticism* in original Greek is "to look closely" or "to examine"). Now technology provides a means to firm up the results of the investigation. X-rays reveal abnormalities, and CT scans show cancer, and they can confirm a miraculous healings, as a direct result of prayer. Representatives of science, medical doctors, for example, can be interviewed. A skeptic may follow up on a miracle to find out if the patient was suffering from temporary hysteria, and was not healed after all. I have seen reports on these “temporary miracles,” but I have also seen reports that confirm that a miracle was genuine. Next, if completely blind eyes recovering sight, for example, can be filmed and verified that there was no “trick photography” or computer generated images, then why would anyone reject such reliable testimony, unless he started off willfully blind? Maybe the skeptic himself would like to attend religious gatherings or church services to investigate. With the leader’s permission, maybe he can film a miracle. This would go a long way to eliminate any suspicion. Thus, technology as witness—honestly used—provides a powerful counter to question-begging rejection of all testimonies.
D. C. Lewis investigated fairly and scientifically. He concludes that miracles happened at the Harrogate conference. Skeptics too have a duty to their name to investigate.

**Theological significance of miracles**

(1) Miracles today do not alter the foundation of Christianity, as if they carry as much weight and authority as Christ’s miracles, especially the Resurrection. Each miracle must be put in its proper context, and Christ is the indispensable founder of Christianity. Indeed, it is he who works the miracles today, not a human “faith healer.”

(2) Phillip Wiebe, who teaches in the philosophy department at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, argues that Biblical authors who are accurate about external matters that can be independently verified, such as the chronology or jurisdiction of Roman rulers, are not necessarily accurate about miracles. However, he says, rightly, that miracles happening today like the ones in the Bible would support the accounts of Biblical miracles.

I suggest that the apologetic [defense of a faith] that is needed would show that at least some kind of events alleged in the biblical documents are still found today . . . If events similar to those reported in the miracle stories in the Bible were to be found at the present time, the credibility of those ancient documents would be enhanced. (pp. 116-17)

Though writing from an opposing viewpoint about the Bible, Wiebe is right about this one point. Miracles today like the ones recorded in the Bible can only confirm the Bible. For example, a miracle recovery of sight today supports the Biblical record of similar miracles about healing the blind. In turn, this supports such highly significant and unique miracles as the Virgin Birth and Christ’s Resurrection. Miracles today certainly do not disconfirm Bible miracles.

(3) Replying to Wiebe’s opposition, Larmer agrees, up to a point. Bible-like miracles today indeed confirm the reports in the Bible. However, the case for them can be made through unvarnished reasoning without them. Larmer correctly says:

The occurrence of similar events [as those recorded in the Bible] in contemporary times is no more necessary for grounding a rational belief in the events recorded in the Bible than a second crossing of the Alps by a Carthaginian army is necessary to ground belief in Hannibal’s exploit. (“Miracles and Testimony,” p. 130)

This is true for Christian apologists who have little or no experience with witnessing with their own eyes a genuine miracle. But empirically verifying a (claimed) miracle would only strengthen their philosophical arguments.

**Conclusion**
Miracles happening today are not a theoretical possibility for those who experience them. The same is true for those who witness them with their own eyes. Miracles are real. They happen.

“A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence” (Hume, p. 110).

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