

About Miracles

In 1748 the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume published a work called An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding which contained Section X: "Of Miracles". In this section, Hume argues that miracles do not happen because they cannot happen, because they are a violation of the laws of nature which, as we all continually experience, don't change.

Because he was a philosopher, he used a lot of words to make his point, but the point has been largely refuted by numerous philosophers both then and since then. What is left is the popular belief in society today that miracles do not happen because they cannot happen. In fact, one of the most often used arguments against the Bible or against the gospels in particular, is that they describe miracles, many of them. If they describe miracles and miracles can't happen, then they are false and should not be taken seriously. You may have come up against that kind of argument yourself.

What was at the basis of Hume's argument was his personal lack of experience of the miraculous. He, and many of those he talked with, had not experienced anything that you could be sure was miraculous, so he refused to believe that such things were possible. He thought it was a denial of reason and, if you're going to be taken seriously, you can't deny reason!

One of his arguments against miracles that were testified to by religious people was that religious people are notably untrustworthy. He said that they are emotional, more likely to be irrational than an ordinary citizen. In fact, he raised so many objections to the testimony a person might offer in favour of miracles, that it was clear that if a miracle took place right in front of him, he would have to reject it. His reasoning was circular, starting with no possibility of miracles and ending in exactly the same place.

People who read Hume today, and many still accept his weak argument against miracles, have available to them much more evidence in favour of the miraculous than Hume did. The test for us is to convince them to study the issue for themselves, to actually interview people who have witnessed miracles and to see if Hume's objections hold any weight at all.

To help us help others overcome their objections to the Christian faith because it teaches the existence of the supernatural, the miraculous, let's look at miracles today.

I want to start with a quotation from Hwa Yung, who was at one time the principal of Malaysia Theological Seminary in Kuala Lumpur and later the bishop of the Methodist church in Malaysia. He wrote:

Western theology invariably asks the question: Are miracles possible? This of course addresses the Enlightenment problem of a closed universe. In much of Asia that is a non-question because the miraculous is assumed and fairly regularly experienced.

What he is saying about Asia he could be saying about Africa, about Latin America and about the rest of the world for the years that came before the so-called Enlightenment. In ancient Greece and Rome, in ancient Judaism, in the religions of the east, the miraculous has always been expected and experienced. It is only in the West where people were too smart to expect or experience supernatural events that they say have “died out”. It’s not that people don’t get healed or delivered in the West, just that most people don’t accept their testimony or the testimony of those who treated them. There is such a strong anti-supernatural bias in play in the West at this time that faith healers are often thought of as charlatans, are portrayed that way in the media, and, sadly, sometimes they are.

Here’s a number that might surprise you, as isolated as most of us are in the West: hundreds of millions of people on this earth claim to have witnessed miraculous healings. This is not the kind of information that would make David Hume comfortable if he were still alive. Hundreds of millions of people are willing to declare that they have seen evidence of a miracle, something that can’t be explained in naturalistic terms, something that needs a supernatural explanation. I want to spend the rest of our time today sharing with you a small sample of their stories.

Over and over and over again, as you read stories of God’s healing power, you see the result: the growth of the church. In north-east India, among the Nishi tribe, the son of one of their leading officials died. They had sought doctors and they had offered sacrifices to their gods, but nothing had helped him. A local pharmacist had suggested that they pray to Jesus, the Christian God. The official laid his hand on his boy’s head and promised to worship this Christian God if he would heal his son. The boy’s eyes opened and he recovered, resulting in hundreds of people converting to Christ.

In India, more than 400,000 villages have reportedly been exposed to the *Jesus Film* in 51 different languages. One mother refused to come to the showing because her daughter had been suffering on the ground for days from dysentery. The worker prayed for the daughter who was instantly healed and thirty friends and relatives came with her to the film showing that night, with most of them giving their lives to Jesus.

A pastor from Mindanao, in the Philippines, was visiting a church in a different part of the country when he was asked to pray for a young man, about 30, who had been sick and in great pain for months. While he prayed, he felt sure that the son would die, so he left quite quickly afterwards. The next day, however, the mother found him and insisted that he come to their home. When he arrived the woman pointed to a man fixing the roof and asked the pastor, “Do you recognize that guy?” He wondered aloud if this was the brother of the man he had prayed for the night before, but was told, “No, this is the one.” Unable to believe it, the pastor then went to the room where the man had been lying to see if he wasn’t still there. He wasn’t.

A woman who works with the poor in a mountain region of the Philippines tells the story of David Dominong, a man who had been severely burned after contact with a

high tension electric wire. She asked the author of the book Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts, named Craig Keener, if he would like to meet David and hear the story from him firsthand. Of course he did, and he tells the story:

David, a welder, showed me the ghastly scars on his arms and torso, indicating the severity of his electrocution. After his electrocution in October 2002, he had been hospitalized one month and ten days, with third-to-fourth degree burns, and the doctor told him that it might be three to five years before he would be able to walk. After he left the hospital, no longer able to afford the fees, he remained home in a wheelchair. Although he was considering amputation, his sister convinced him to attend an evangelistic crusade at a community hall in December of that same year. At about 11 p.m., some men carried him from the car in which he had been brought and took him to the stage. After the preacher prayed for him, he told him to walk. David had no assurance that this would be possible but after walking about twenty meters with no crutch, he was astonished to realize that he could in fact now walk. The people there knew him and gathered around him to see if this was genuine. The next day, various people, including some who had not been healed at the crusade, visited his home to see if he was still whole. They found him walking outside his house.

David became a follower of Jesus, testified to many friends and relatives about the work of God, both in his body and in his heart and has led others to become followers of Jesus.

Dr. Ivan Satyavrata, leader of the Assemblies of God ministries in Calcutta, tells several stories of miraculous healings. One is the story of Nivedita Ghosh who received surgery and radiation treatment for brain cancer, treatments which destroyed her salivary glands and her ability to talk and to eat. Doctors gave her five months at the outside and said she would never be able to speak. When Nivedita was nearly unconscious, a Christian prayed for her, her fever broke and she was able to speak. The family got rid of their deity statues and talismans and became followers of Jesus. Within six to eight months, she returned to normal health and the doctor who had operated on her wanted to do some tests: he couldn't even find the scars from his surgery.

Another story told by Dr. Satyavrata:

In 1977 Prabhakar David's arms grew so blistered and resistant to treatment that doctors planned to amputate them. Though Prabhakar was barely conscious, Ajit Tiwari, a deacon at the church, came and prayed over him. Prabhakar awoke much better in the morning and the following morning the pain, fever, blisters and pus were completely gone, without leaving so much as a scar. Prabhakar also recounts the experience of his daughter Priyanka Rachael. In 1985, when she was four, she fell from a window about a hundred feet to the road below. When they found her, they rushed her to hospital. The little girl kept insisting that she felt someone holding and protecting her just before she landed. To everyone's amazement, she did not even have a scratch.

In Sri Lanka, Wimalasiri's right foot suffered swelling for two years without relief, despite the efforts of doctors, medicine men and an exorcist. He scoffed at the Christians who came to pray for him one night, but the next morning he awoke to discover his foot was totally healed. He wasn't keen on becoming a Christian and so resisted for three months, but later became a pastor and established a church in an area with very few Christians.

Healing stories are numerous in countries like Nepal, South Korea, Viet Nam, Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Fiji, Papua New Guinea. Even in Australia, where a Youth With a Mission leader named Matthew Dawson was admitted to hospital, delirious and in severe pain and diagnosed with meningitis. Shortly after a doctor had told him that it would be weeks or even months before he would be able to leave the hospital, he suddenly felt a warmth in his body, the pain left, he fell asleep and was released the next afternoon. Later he called his father and learned that the moment he was healed was exactly at the end of a meeting his father had called to pray for his healing.

In China, countless accounts of miraculous healing are coming out of both the house churches and the three-self churches, which are government supervised! In China, praying with the sick is an expression of community care, and so anyone from the church is likely to come to the home of someone who is ill and to pray for their healing, and to keep coming back until the person is well again. Members of the China Christian Council have reported that roughly half of the new conversions have come in conjunction with a faith healing experience. Those kinds of stories and results are what we hear from Teresa when we get news about her time in China. Other sources cite reported healings as the impetus behind 90% of conversions in China today. David Aikman, reporter for many years for Time Magazine, has said, "It is difficult to investigate the phenomenon of Christianity in China today without hearing stories of miraculous healings."

One Western researcher reports this story from China. In Taixing in October 1989, doctors discovered that Zhao Su'e, age 21, had serious cancer that would take her life in the next six months. A Christian prayed for her and over the next few months she recovered and was found to be completely healthy. By 1994, 4-5 years later, the church in her town had grown from just a few to between 5 and 6 thousand.

Chen Guifang was bed-ridden for eight years, fed through a tube because she was unable to eat. The day after she decided to follow Jesus, she asked for food for the first time in years and, after a month, was completely recovered, leading to the starting of a new church. Other stories from China include the healing of a nearly dead prisoner who was a victim of the plague, a man who had suffered for years from open, bleeding sores, a man had x-rays show two broken ribs but, not being able to afford the medical treatment he went to another district to recuperate. There he received prayer and again had x-rays, this time they showed no break, not even a sign that there had been a break. The pastor of a Three-Self church found a group in his church praying over a girl who had just been pronounced dead by the local doctor --

she recovered.

In 2007, Craig Keener had the opportunity to interview a group of Chinese pastors and asked them if they had any healing stories to tell him. They were not Pentecostal or Charismatic pastors, but they were ready to start talking. Two of them confirmed the story of an elderly mother from a prominent atheist family who was diagnosed in three hospitals as having inoperable, terminal and rapidly spreading brain stem cancer. The simple act of walking soon became impossible for her. Within a month of being prayed for, the tumor had shrunk from two centimeters to the size of a grain of rice and she soon began walking and carrying on normally. The entire family are now believers and the mother has testified widely of her miraculous recovery.

Another woman, this time in Shandong Province, was taken by her family to a church service for healing, even though none of the family were Christians at that time. She was half-paralyzed, but, after receiving prayer, she got up and began to walk -- again, the effect of the miracle was rapid church growth.

Let me quote from Keener's book again:

An elderly woman pastor, with a year of medical training, lamented to me her small faith in seeing only seven or eight dramatic healings, plus many less dramatic ones, over the years. When I asked her if she had ever witnessed healings of eyes or ears, she immediately told me the story of a non-Christian elderly woman about ten years earlier, who had not been able to open one of her eyes for 27 or 28 years due to a nerve problem. As soon as this pastor laid hands on her, the eye opened. The healed woman immediately became a Christian and continues to follow Jesus to this day.

This remarkable catalogue of healings goes back for decades. In the 1930's, Dr. John Sung, from Fujian Province in southwest China, was frequently involved in the miraculous. He recorded healings in his diary and the list he assembled is remarkable. Leprosy, blindness, paralysis and inability to walk, muteness, deafness, deformed spine, pneumonia and tuberculosis were all listed in his diary. Most of the healing took place instantly, but some was gradual, such as the case of leprosy where the healing occurred over two days. He acknowledges that not everyone was healed, an admission that is made throughout these accounts. Dr. Sung admits that some were only partially healed and that he himself was often quite sick. He died from an agonizing disease that he suffered from for the last three years of his life. Rather than losing faith, he believed that he understood at least some of God's purpose in it.

Now, let's make some observations. What have I left out? Africa, Latin America, Europe, North America. Most of what I just shared with you was from the continent of Asia. I also left out stories from places where it was not possible to interview eye-witnesses, places like Mongolia, which has many, many stories of miracles taking place in recent days.

What conclusions can a person make from hundreds of millions of eye-witness accounts, of personal testimonies, to miraculous healings? Let me suggest a few:

1. The Western perception that miracles do not take place is a uniquely western perception. It fits the world view of anti-supernaturalism, the world view of “enlightenment” thinking which leaves westerners in the dark when it comes to the great acts of God in history and in our day.
2. The exciting growth of the Christian church around the world has been carried on the wings of the supernatural. The reason there is rapid numerical growth in the church of Jesus Christ today is not because we have better preaching than we’ve ever had, or more instruments on the stage or better food at our potlucks. If there is one reason we can point to, it is that Jesus has demonstrated His power in the lives of millions upon millions of people, bringing healing, deliverance and hope.
3. Not everyone is healed, not here, not across the ocean and it’s also not dependent on who is doing the praying. We can frustrate ourselves trying to think of reasons why God would not heal everyone, but I think it would be more worthwhile to pray for everyone and see how many He will heal.
4. David Hume was wrong because he believed that all or almost all people don’t experience healing, either in themselves or in those they know. He assumed that because *he* didn’t know about miracles, that nobody did, and so he made an argument that people who don’t have this experience can comfort themselves with. The real world is much bigger than Mr. Hume’s and is much more interesting, too, because God is active in it.

What should we do with the miraculous?

1. We should quickly reject the argument about miracles that so many are making today -- that they can’t be true because miracles don’t happen and therefore the gospels can’t be trusted to tell us the truth about Jesus. When people know that there are hundreds of millions of eye-witness accounts from people whose lives have been changed dramatically, they lose an underpinning for their rejection of the gospel. Keep chipping away!
2. I believe we should be bold in asking people if we can pray for them. If they say “no”, we’ve endured one little awkward moment and who hasn’t done that already. If they say, “yes” and nothing happens, they will at least be able to acknowledge that we cared enough to ask our God to intervene and help them in their need. If they say “yes” and something powerful does happen, then they will always have to deal with a reality they may not be entirely comfortable with. But, they will feel better, and they will be one step closer to admitting that God is real and that His purposes for them are full of love and grace.