

Study Guide #10: Are Miracles Possible?

Introduction

In Explorer I, Study Guide #9, we concluded that it's more probable that Jesus is God than that He's not God. Yet logically, there must be greater evidence to conclude that miracles can occur in order to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. The plain truth is that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity is a false religion. In this Study Guide, we examine the question, "Are Miracles Possible?"

Question #1: Isn't it impossible for any miracle to occur?

Answer: The short answer to this question is that it depends upon whether or not you believe in God. If God exists—who, by definition, is a personal, intelligent, and omnipotent Being whose nature is essentially outside of time and space—then such a God must have created not only the physical universe, but also the natural laws that govern it. And if He created those laws, He can certainly suspend them to perform any miracle that He wishes to perform. We invite you to review Explorer I, Study Guides #1 and #2 about God's existence.

Question #2: But is there evidence that any miracles have occurred?

Answer: Please see Explorer I, Study Guides #1 and #2. There we demonstrated from logic that the greatest miracle has already occurred—the creation of the material universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) by a supernatural God whose nature is immaterial and outside of time and space. Because that miracle has already occurred, there is no good reason to doubt that other lesser miracles cannot also occur. They are indeed rare, or else they wouldn't be called miracles. We agree with atheists that any accounts of miracles must have extraordinary evidence before being accepted. But the fact that the universe was created supernaturally out of nothing shows that the possibility of miracles cannot be automatically excluded.

Question #3: Where did the idea that miracles are impossible come from?

Answer: No one knows who the first person was to reject miracles outright. However, since the rise of secularism in Western civilization, the most influential early thinker to attempt to use reason or logic to deny the possibility of miracles was David Hume (d. 1776), a Scottish philosopher. Almost every critic of religion since Hume—especially of Christianity—has echoed his arguments. Hume's basic argument was that a miracle would be a violation of natural law. He said that such violations are impossible because these natural laws rest upon very high probabilities based upon observations over long periods of time by thousands



David Hume

of people. Therefore, he said that it was far more likely that those who report a miracle are mistaken or lying than it is that the miracle actually occurred.

Question #4: Did he leave the door open for any miracle to ever take place?

Answer: In theory, David Hume left a slim chance for a miracle to occur. He said that if the report of a miracle being false was a greater miracle than the miracle reported, then one can accept the report of a miracle as true. But Hume thought this scenario really could never happen, or at least that it had never happened, because he never believed any reports of miracles of any kind.

Question #5: Are you saying that violations of natural law can happen?

Answer: Technically, no, we aren't saying that a natural law can be violated, or else it wouldn't be a law. Human laws can and are violated by someone every day. But how could a natural physical law be violated if it were really a law? At the same time, however, it might be counteracted by some physical force or even neutralized temporarily. Or it might be temporarily suspended—although only the lawmaker could logically have the ability to do that. When we are speaking of natural physical laws, of course, the lawmaker would be God. [NOTE: Of course, it's also true that we might not understand every natural law, so that what we would call a miracle is not a suspension or neutralization of natural law at all.]



Isaac Newton Discovers Law of Gravity

Question #6: Was David Hume completely consistent with his own thinking regarding the possibility of miracles?

Answer: No. Hume's assumption that there are natural laws that we can understand in the first place is ultimately inconsistent with his own philosophy. Hume taught that no cause-and-effect relationships can ever be known with certainty because *perhaps* the trillionth time someone takes the same action as others have done long before him, something unexpected happens. Hume was famous for teaching that since you cannot experience the future, you cannot know that a natural law exists. Yet when it came to miracles, Hume assumed the existence of natural law and that a miracle would be a violation of it.

Question #7: Is there any other logical fallacies in Hume's arguments?

Answer: Yes, there is at least one more. Hume, and the modern critics who echo his arguments, are guilty of circular reasoning. He dismissed all reports of miracles as false because he already said that miracles cannot occur. Then he also said that he knows they cannot occur because all of the reports of them must be false. The more reasonable approach is to (1) examine all of the circumstances and facts about the claim of a particular miracle, and (2) determine whether it's more reasonable to believe it or not to believe it. In other words, let the evidence—along with the use of intelligent reasoning—lead to your conclusion rather than to have predetermined automatically that the report of the miracle must be in error.

Question #8: But how do you determine whether belief or disbelief in a reported miracle is reasonable? Isn't such a determination subjective—just in the eye of the beholder?

Answer: Ultimately, what people think is reasonable or unreasonable is an individual decision. In that sense, it's a subjective matter because you cannot show scientific evidence that makes your decision a fact. But that's true about the use of human reason in *any* part of our lives. It's not unique to religious or spiritual things. For example, the atheist who denies the possibility of miracles is also exercising his own reason, making his conclusion a subjective matter of opinion rather than fact. That is simply the nature of human reason. But if a reported miracle is (1) consistent with the historical evidence *and* (2) is the most reasonable option available to you, then it may be believed. Or, to put it in Hume's terms, if the report of a miracle being false would be more miraculous than the alleged miracle itself, then it's more rational to believe that a miracle actually occurred.



Resurrected Jesus

To test the truthfulness of Christianity, one must use historical evidence and reason regarding the alleged resurrection of Jesus. That is precisely the examination which we make in Explorer I, Study Guide #11.