

Appendix 13 from *The Coming of the Holy Spirit* by Phillip Jensen.

13. Miracles

It may come as a shock to find that Christians don't believe in 'miracles'.

You will find the word (in singular or plural form) in the King James version of the Bible 37 times, but decreasingly in modern translations.¹ This is because the word has undergone, and is undergoing, a change of meaning. And the new meaning does not fit either with the text of Scripture or the theology of the Bible.

Dictionaries describe modern usage

The word 'miracle' came into English from Latin (*miraculum*) via the Old French in the 12th century. It meant 'an object of wonder'. Such a meaning was very suitable, for many events in the Bible caused people to wonder and be amazed or astonished at the extraordinary things that happened.

However, today the word 'miracle' is widely used to mean something like "an extraordinary and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore attributed to a divine agency" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2015) or "an effect in the physical world which surpasses all known human or natural powers and is therefore ascribed to supernatural agency" (The Macquarie Dictionary, 2017). These definitions point to a philosophical discussion about God which are not part of the biblical witness. For to speak of 'natural laws' or 'natural powers' reflects a deistic, if not an atheistic, view of reality—neither of which are consistent with the Bible's Theism.²

Both of the dictionary definitions above turn on human inability to explain phenomena as the basis for an event qualifying as having a supernatural source and thus being classed as a 'miracle'. This creates the 'god of the gaps', who constantly shrivels in size and importance as humans are able to explain more and more of the world's phenomena. Such a diminishing god has nothing to do with the true and living God, the almighty Creator and Sustainer of the world, who reveals himself in the Scriptures.

The argument from miracles

The reason for raising this discussion about the meaning of words is that words are powerful, both in enlightening and confusing our understanding. For those who are affected by the materialist mindset of atheism or deism, the interruption of natural order is important to prove or disprove the existence of the supernatural or even of God. But the Bible does not engage in questions of God's existence, nor does it answer such questions with 'miracles'. Consequently, Christians have to revise our language away from the word 'miracle' in order to avoid misunderstanding—not only the non-Christian misunderstanding of our message, but also our own confusion when we are seduced into trying to answer our contemporaries' doubts about God with arguments from miracles.

There are two men named Lazarus who point to the problem of arguing from miracles. The first is the rich man in Jesus' parable of Luke 16. This Lazarus hopes to help his brothers avoid his after-death experience of judgement by having somebody sent back from the dead to warn them. But he is told: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be

¹ The ESV, for example, uses it 13 times.

² These are late-16th- and 17th-century words. Atheism denies the existence of God (a-theism), while Deism accepts the existence of a God who created the world but never interferes with its machine-like running. In contrast, Theism accepts that the Creator continues to involve himself in the ongoing operation of the world.

convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31). Miracles—even the resurrection—will not convince an unbeliever.

The second Lazarus is the friend of Jesus who died and whom Jesus raised after four days in the tomb (John 11:1-44). Near the end of John 11, we read that Israel’s leaders were afraid that the Romans would come and take away their place, so they planned to kill Jesus (11:47-53). Their problem is not that they did not believe Lazarus had come back from the dead; their problem is that they did not believe in Jesus. They saw the sign, but didn’t believe or accept what it signified—a recurring theme in John’s Gospel (e.g. 2:23-25, 12:37-40).

Unbelief is a problem of the will, not the mind; it is moral, not mental. It is further complicated by God’s sovereignty in revealing himself to people. For God has chosen in his wisdom not to be known by human wisdom (1 Cor 1:21), and so he will not be found in either Greek wisdom or in Jewish signs, but in the cross of Christ (1 Cor 1:17-31).

The Bible’s amazing events

The King James Version translated two different Greek words—‘signs’ and ‘power’—as “miracles”.³ Neither of these words requires that something be inexplicable according to normal scientific laws. One of the greatest so-called ‘miracles’ of the Old Testament is the crossing of the Red Sea—an event so extraordinary that many have doubted that it truly happened. But it is explained, at least in part, in Exodus 14:21: “the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night”. The dividing of the waters is no less a ‘miracle’ because God used ‘natural forces’ to make it happen. But by the two dictionary definitions above, it would not be defined as a miracle.

Many of the so-called ‘miraculous’ events in the New Testament are described, not by God’s interference with natural order, but by people’s reaction: those who witness the events ‘wonder’ or ‘marvel’; they are ‘astonished’ or ‘amazed’. Sometimes, they are afraid (e.g. Mark 4:41). When people speak of what Jesus was doing, they sometimes use a very prosaic description: they are simply his ‘works’. The point is not that these events are amazing in themselves or for God, but that they create amazement in humans. I may be able to explain a lot about a sunset or a baby’s birth, but I will still be amazed and marvel at what God has done.

It is not that first-century people were gullible and superstitious, lacking understanding of how the world works. They knew perfectly well that dead people stayed dead. They knew—probably a lot more acutely than modern people—that after four days in the grave Lazarus’ body would stink; they knew he was not returning to life. They knew that feeding multitudes and walking on water was not normal, nor was it within their power. They were right to be amazed and astonished by Jesus’ actions.

Jesus’ “mighty works and wonders and signs”

So why did Jesus do amazing, seemingly inexplicable things—things that moderns would wrongly call ‘miracles’? It was not to demonstrate God’s existence or his own power, but to indicate his fulfilment of the Old Testament expectations of a Messiah or Christ. Notice, for example, his response to John the Baptist’s question in Matthew 11:

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

³ *Sēmeion* (sign) and *dunamis* (power).

good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Matt 11:2-6)

We may wrongly think that Jesus is pointing to his miracles to prove that he is God, but that is neither John’s question nor Jesus’ answer. John was looking forward to the coming of the King of God’s kingdom—the Christ. Jesus’ response was to remind John of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah (29, 35:5-6, 61:1) to indicate not only that he was the Christ, but also what kind of Christ he was.

Jesus’ feeding of thousands (five thousand men, plus women and children; Matt 14:21, Mark 6:44) generally challenges the mind of those who misunderstand his works. For having fed the crowd, the disciples got into a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee while Jesus dismissed the crowd. That night, a storm arises and threatens the disciples’ boat. But in the midst of the storm, Jesus is seen walking on the water and was about to “pass by them” (Mark 6:48). They think he is a ghost, but he reassures them that it is him as he gets in the boat and tells them not to be afraid.⁴ The next part of Mark’s account makes no sense to those who misunderstand Jesus’ works:

And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. (6:51-52)

What do the loaves have to do with being astounded at walking on the water and stilling the sea? While ‘walking on water’ has become a modern way of talking of somebody who is god-like—or at least thinks they are—that is not the point here. Feeding thousands is every bit as impressive as walking on water. But the reason the disciples were “utterly astounded” (v. 51) is because they failed to *understand* about the loaves. They failed to see the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness as Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament promise of sending another prophet like Moses—who, under God, fed the multitude in the wilderness with the bread (or manna). So, they were astounded at the new Moses leading them safely across the sea.

Seeing God at work

The work of God is not necessarily displayed in the unusual, for God is at work in all things (Rom 8:28). He forms both the light and the darkness; he makes wellbeing and calamity (Isa 45:7). To see God at work does not require some ‘suspension of natural law’, but the opening of sinful eyes. Two people look at a mountain: one sees the height, the gradient, the colour, and the geological forces that have shaped it; the other sees the height, the gradient, the colour, and the geological forces that God has used to shape it. One may see beyond the facts to the grandeur of the mountain; the other will see even more of the grandeur of the mountain, knowing the even grander grandeur of the God who made it.

If we must use the word ‘miracle’ to talk of God’s work, the “extraordinary and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws” is the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing those who are spiritually blind to see, those who are spiritually dead to new life, and those who are the enemies of God to the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.

⁴ One wonders what they could have made of the man who walked on the water and then described himself as “I am” (cf. Exod 3:14)—translated in verse 50 as “it is I”.