

How do we distinguish between a miracle and a coincidence?
July 23, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

We have a really interesting question to consider today:

How do we distinguish between a miracle and a coincidence or something that was going to happen anyway?

When something dramatic and unexpected happens that changes the current state of affairs, how do we know that it was God who did it and not just random happenstance?

That's a really interesting question that got me thinking hard this week. Because this question is really bigger than the issue of miracle versus coincidence; whether they knew it or not, this person has actually asked an important question about God's sovereignty: how much of 'what happens' happens because God made it happen? Is there such thing as a coincidence the way the world sees it? I want to explore that a bit later but right now, let's focus on this person's question: how do we distinguish between a miracle and a coincidence?

Now before we get too far into it, we'd better stop and define our terms here because the word miracle gets used to describe all sorts of things in our everyday speech. Miracle Whip is hardly miraculous and the perfect parking spot at the mall at Christmas isn't really a miracle either from God's point of view. So what IS a miracle?

Simply put, a miracle is an unexpected change in the status quo that goes beyond the limits of the laws of nature. If something can be explained by natural processes like gravity and growth and entropy then it's probably not a miracle; if something has happened on a supernatural level that goes beyond the bounds of what we'd normally call 'normal,' then we would call that a miracle.

For example, Craig Keener tells the story of Brian Willis who had a mass in his stomach the size of a golf ball that doctors diagnosed as stage 4B Burkitt's lymphoma. They told him they couldn't do anything for him and one even suggested that he had at most 10 hours to live. And yet he survived those ten hours and then into the next day and into the next until his radiologist finally appeared looking baffled. The latest tests showed that the tumour was entirely gone. Contrary to every expectation and contrary to the way things normally work, the cancer was gone. Brian had been praying the whole time and is still living cancer free.¹ We would call something that defies the normal progression of cell growth and reproduction like that is a supernatural intervention. It's a miracle.

If that's a miracle, then what's a coincidence? Again, simply put, a coincidence is an unexpected event or two things 'coinciding' that takes place within the bounds of natural law apparently randomly or by accident.

For example, earlier this week, I was washing the blade of a blender and something happened that needed my attention so I dropped it into the milk pitcher I was using to hold the soapy water thinking 'Ok, I have to remember that that's in there.' Then, wouldn't you know it, I got distracted by stuff and by the time I got back to the dishes, I had forgotten my mental warning and plunged my hand carelessly into the milk pitcher with the blender blades at the bottom. And yet, I didn't get cut.

As you can imagine, I was very happy about that, but we don't need to appeal to supernatural explanations to make sense of what happened. You could say I was very lucky, or that the force of my hand pushing into the water pushed the blade out of the way or that as my hand hit the water, my mind instantly remembered the blade down below and stopped my hand from going deep enough to cut myself. Those are reasonable natural explanations for what happened and so some people would call that a coincidence.

So we've got miracles, we've got coincidences; how do we tell the difference between the two? Well, in my mind, the natural/supernatural distinction is pretty helpful in answering that question. If something has happened that goes beyond the usual laws of nature, then I would call it a miracle; if that same thing can be explained by natural means, then you might call it a coincidence.

For example, when Jesus fed the five thousand people, there was a kid there with five loaves and two fishes. That can be explained by natural means – his mom gave him food to go for a picnic – people would probably call that a coincidence. Jesus though then took those five loaves and two fishes and fed five thousand people plus with them; I know you're good at stretching out a meal when somebody shows up at your door unexpectedly, but a 20,000% increase? That's supernatural. That's beyond the realm of nature so that's a miracle. So general rule of thumb: if you've got a natural cause, you could call it a coincidence but if it goes beyond the realm of nature, then that's a miracle.

Let's flesh that out by applying the rule of thumb to a few case studies.

First: when I was finishing seminary, there was a guy in my class who had a broken leg and it was causing him a lot of pain. At the start of class, the professors usually prayed or asked a student to pray and one particular day, I was asked to pray and I prayed for this guy's leg.

About a week later, I saw him again and he was flabbergasted because the pain had gone away the moment I prayed. His leg was still broken but it didn't hurt; was that a miracle or a coincidence?

Well, let's see. Could we explain his leg feeling better by natural means? Well, sure. It may just have happened that my prayer for his leg coincided with the moment his Tylenol 3's kicked in. It doesn't necessarily take an act of God to make a person's leg feel better so I think that many people would just call that a coincidence.

Let's say though that after I prayed, this guy's leg knit itself back together so that by the time I saw him next, he'd been for an xray and discovered that the fracture was entirely gone and that he could walk on it with no trouble whatsoever. That I could not explain naturally. Broken bones don't usually reform in a matter of days so we're dealing with something supernatural here. THAT would be a miracle.

Here's another one. Earlier this week, I read a story about a woman, wheelchair-bound for years, who was prayed for in Jesus's name. She was immediately healed, out of her wheelchair, and months later phoned the Benefits Office to stop her disability allowance, whereupon she is told that the system does not allow for miracles, so she will have to keep receiving payments (which leads the Daily Mail and the BBC to run an outraged story about it).ⁱⁱ

A woman being wheelchair bound for years suddenly being able to walk again and confident enough in the healing to give up financial benefits is a supernatural event – a miracle. These things don't just

happen in nature. We'd have to conclude that even if the Benefits Office doesn't agree that God intervened in this situation that that was a miracle.

Let's do one more. One night I was driving from Waterloo to Cambridge to get to seminary and it was winter so it was dark out. I'm going along the highway 8; all of a sudden, I realize that there's a car coming straight at me, the wrong way on the highway. I have next to no time to respond and next thing I know, the guy's smashed off my driver's side view mirror, but beyond that, everything was ok. A police officer pulled up a few seconds later and before long I sitting in class trying to pay attention while figuring out what on earth just happened!

Coincidence? Miracle?

I think that some people would say that was a coincidence. You don't need to appeal to supernatural power to explain how that happened. I was just very lucky some people would say and I just happened to miss getting hit by that car.

So rule of thumb, I think you can use the distinction between natural and supernatural causes to tell the difference between a miracle and a coincidence.

But this is where we get into the bigger question that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. Just because God isn't working supernaturally doesn't mean that God isn't working at all. I don't think that it was a miracle that I didn't get hit on the way to seminary that night, but I don't think that it was a coincidence either. The fact that I could keep on going to seminary that night suggests to me that that was not random chance but God at work to keep me safe that night.

People around us may say that these unexpected events are just happy coincidences, but as believers, we see them as expressions of care by a good and sovereign God. The Bible shows us again and again that what the world calls 'coincidence,' God calls 'providence:' the sovereign master of all things quietly orchestrating events so that they unfold according to His good plans and purposes.

Isaiah 46:9–11 puts it like this, God says: "I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please...' What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do."

3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, *sustaining all things by his powerful word* (Heb 1:3 NIV).

17 He is before all things, and *in him all things hold together* (Col 1:17 NIV).

[He] ...works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will... (Eph 1:11 NIV).

Sometimes God works those things out supernaturally – miraculously intervening in our lives – like when He got rid of that tumour or enabled that lady to walk after many years in a wheelchair.

Sometimes though He works through natural means and accomplishes His will through the mundane realities of everyday life. I may have prayed and that guy's meds might have kicked in same time but his relief was not random; it was ultimately God orchestrating those events so that we would recognize that

He is good and that He answers prayer. Some people will call that coincidence but the reality is that God at work in the everyday unfolding of His will.

I think we might say this: miracles are God's divine interventions; 'coincidences' are a part of His divine provision. He works in the miraculous and in the mundane.

Now from here, I think that there are two things that we need to consider – a question and an application. First, the question.

1. When something miraculous happens, how do we know that it was GOD who caused it to happen and not the random forces of the universe?

I was thinking about today's question, trying to figure out what prompted someone to ask it and I realized maybe they're actually wanting to know what to say to someone who says that what they experienced as a miracle was just a coincidence. Like, maybe this person has been miraculously healed of some affliction and yet they have a relative who says 'well, that's just a coincidence. It just happened that you got better.' Maybe that's where this question is coming from. So what would I say to help them to see that what they call 'coincidence' was actually 'God at work'?

Admittedly, that's a complicated question and I'm not even sure that this is what the person wanted to know about, but I think it's valuable so let me say two things about it.

First, this week I read something from a Christian philosopher and apologist named J. P. Moreland. He proposes this 'Intelligent Agent Principle' that essentially goes like this: if something happens that is highly unlikely and also is uniquely specific, the implication is that someone has caused it to happen. I'll say that again. If something happens that is highly unlikely and uniquely specific, according to probabilities, it can't have 'just happened randomly;' someone must have caused it to happen.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like, when that person prayed for that the wheelchair bound lady to get up and walk, it was highly unlikely that she would actually do so. And yet she did. And her walking didn't happen in a vacuum; her healing was preceded by a uniquely specific prayer that God would enable her to walk. So if something highly unlikely (a wheelchair bound woman walking after many years) happened in relation to a uniquely specific circumstance (someone praying for her), the Intelligent Agent Principle would say that that healing was not random, but that someone caused it to happen.

Similarly, Val shared with me something neat from Friendship House this week. The food pantry there was looking a little bare and so they prayed for more food for their people. Within the hour, they got two different loads of food from two different places. Not very likely, coinciding with a specific prayer for food; the independent agency principle suggests that that didn't happen by accident; someone caused it to happen.

So that's the first thing; highly unlikely things happening in uniquely specific situations implies that someone or something caused it to happen; the second thing explains why I think it was God who caused those things to happen.

I'll put it in a couple of premises:

1. Miracles today happen outside of the laws of nature. By their very nature, miracles imply a supernatural cause.

2. In the Bible, we have a supernatural God who says He does miracles and eyewitness testimony indicating that God does indeed do miracles.

It makes sense to me to put those together to say that the God who accomplished supernatural miracles in Bible times is still accomplishing supernatural miracles today.

So what would I say to someone who calls miracles coincidences? I think I would say that these unique events imply that someone has purposefully caused them to happen and the God of the Bible has a history of doing just those sorts of things.

So that's the question; now the application. What do we do with this information? How do we as believers apply this conviction that God works through miracles and coincidences?

I think I would say this:

Know that God works through the miraculous and the mundane and rely on Him for both.

Let me unpack that.

Know this: God works through the miraculous. God DOES still do miracles. He works through supernatural means to accomplish unexpected things and that is wonderful. We can and we should pray for God to supernaturally intervene in the lives of our loved ones and those in the community around us who need God's sovereign care. As scientifically minded Westerners, I think we're often guilty of putting God in a box and kneecapping Him by praying as if He doesn't do miracles. When the rubber hits the road, when the situation is dire, we need to absolutely pray with confidence to the God who does the miraculous.

However, if we get so caught up watching for God to intervene in our lives in miraculous ways, we're going to miss out on the many way that God provides in our everyday lives. Yes God can do big flashy things, but know that more often than not, God is going to work through His careful everyday provision. Thee unexpected coincidences, the serendipitous moments, the divine appointments as my mom likes to say; those are all examples of a wise and compassionate God working things out behind the scenes. Those things that seem coincidental are actually God working things out for good in your life. Rely on Him for that. Give thanks to Him for that.

And watch for Him to work in the miraculous and the mundane.

ⁱ Recorded in Craig Keener, *Miracles Today*, (Baker Academic), pg. 84.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/not-if-but-when-reflections-on-4-different-kinds-of-healing/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See J. P. Moreland, *A Simple Guide to Experience Miracles*, (Zondervan Reflective), pgs. 31-35.