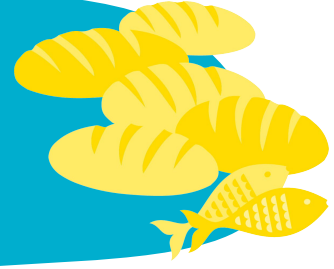


# MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE



In the Bible, there are many accounts of things that might be considered to be miracles. They can be found on both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The stories of miracles of Jesus, such as turning water into wine and walking on water, are most familiar, but the Bible includes stories of miracles carried out by others as well.

## What is a miracle?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a miracle as 'A surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency'.

*According to this definition, what are the three key elements which an event must have if it is to be called a miracle?*

Theologians sometimes classify the miracles in the Bible into categories, such as:

- Healing miracles
- Miracles of provision (in which people receive things that they need)
- Miracles over nature

*Here are summaries of how the Bible tells the stories of nine well-known miracles. Use three colours to show which of them you think belong to each of the categories (it's OK if you think that some of them don't match to any of the categories, or if you think that some of them match up to more than one).*

The burning bush – God speaks to Moses from a bush which is on fire but which is not being destroyed by the fire, and tells him to go and bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

The parting of the Red Sea – God sends a strong east wind that blows all night and divides the waters of the Red Sea, allowing Moses and the Israelites to escape from the pursuing Egyptian army, which is then swept away when the waters return.

Daniel in the lions' den – Daniel was thrown into a den of lions on the orders of the king of Persia, but the lions did not harm him.



Water into wine – when the wine at a wedding party runs out, Jesus turns six large stone jars of water into wine.

Blind Bartimaeus – Jesus restores the sight of a blind beggar at the gates of the city of Jericho.

The calming of the storm – the disciples are terrified by a storm while they are out in their fishing boat, but when Jesus ordered the storm to calm down, it did so.

The feeding of the 5,000 – when a great crowd of people were without food, Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish and made it sufficient to feed them all, with plenty left over.

The resurrection – on the third day after he died, visitors to his tomb find that it is empty, because he has been restored to life, never to die again.

The lame man – a lame man who sits and begs by the gate in Jerusalem is healed in the name of Jesus by the disciples Peter and John.

*In which of these nine stories about miracles:*

*would the people who saw it have been most surprised by what happened?*

*was the greatest benefit brought by the miracle?*

*was the timing of when the miracle happened important?*

## Miracles in the Gospels

In the Bible, there are four accounts of the life of Jesus, which are known as the Gospels. They are named after their authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. All four Gospels recount stories in which miracles are carried out by Jesus.

There is a range of things that Christians might draw out of the miracle stories to help them to better understand who Jesus was, for example:

- That compassion is important, because Jesus is often shown performing miracles out of compassion for people who were suffering or unwell.
- That Jesus refused to perform a miracle just to show how powerful he was, and he never asked for anything in return.
- That the miracles prove that Jesus' teachings were true and that Jesus was who he claimed to be, the Son of God.



## The Feeding of the 5,000

All four Gospels attribute to Jesus the feeding of enormous crowds of people from food that would barely have been enough for him and the twelve disciples alone. The best known example is the feeding of the 5,000.

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew chapter 14 verses 13-21 (NRSV)

What Jesus had just heard was that John the Baptist, his cousin, had been executed on the orders of the local ruler Herod.

The people who were with Jesus that day might have been reminded of stories from the Old Testament, in which God provided food for the twelve tribes of the Israelites while they were in the desert.

*What parts of this story could be described as being a miracle?*

*What might this miracle show a Christian about who Jesus was and what he was like?*

*Highlight the parts of the passage which might have reminded the people of the Old Testament stories in which God provided food for the Israelites while they were in the desert.*



Matthew's story of Jesus focuses on some parts of his life more than on others. For example, he misses out all of Jesus' childhood but wrote a lot about the last week of his life. In a similar way, some miracles he mentions only briefly, but for others he tells the whole story in detail. The story of the feeding of the 5,000 is one of the miracles that he chose to write about in more depth.

*Choose one of the ideas below, or write one of your own, and argue that it is the most important reason why Matthew included the story of the feeding of the 5,000 in his Gospel. Try to use examples from what Matthew wrote to support your answer.*

- ◆ *He wanted to prove to his readers that Jesus was the Son of God*
- ◆ *He wanted to teach his readers a lesson about the importance of feeding the poor*
- ◆ *He wanted to remind his readers, many of whom came from a Jewish background, of some stories in the Old Testament when God provided for the Israelites, and to associate Jesus with them*
- ◆ *A reason of your own*

*Are there any questions which you would like to ask about the feeding of the 5,000? How would each of your questions help you to understand the story better?*



## Healing miracles

Most of the miracles carried out by Jesus in the Gospels are healing miracles: Jesus heals people of blindness, skin diseases and paralysis, and even raises someone from the dead. Passages in the Gospels indicate that Jesus carried out a great number of healings.

After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Matthew chapter 15 verses 29-31 (NRSV)

*Where does this passage say that Jesus carried out these healings?*

*Which types of illness does it mention?*

*What response does the healing get from the crowd?*

Sometimes, the Gospels go into more detail about a specific person who was healed by Jesus. This example comes from Luke's Gospel.

As he (Jesus) approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.' Then he shouted, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'



Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' He said, 'Lord, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

Luke chapter 18 verses 35-43 (NRSV)

*In the time Jesus lived in, many types of illness or disability would mean that the sufferer was shunned and excluded by others. Highlight where this can be seen in the Bible passage.*

*How does the miracle change the attitude of the crowd?*

*How do you think that the blind man's life might have been different once he could see?*

*What does Jesus say that the key factor was in why the man's blindness was healed?*

### **How might Christians today relate to the miracles in the Bible?**

The Gospels tell us that people in Jesus' time were amazed by his miracles, and that in at least some cases, including that of the blind man healed at Jericho, people became followers of Jesus because they had experienced or witnessed a miracle. Amazement and greater faith in God are still responses to the Bible's miracles among Christians today, who are likely to believe that Jesus performed the miracles described in the Bible. Christianity teaches that the greatest miracle of them all was the resurrection of Jesus by God himself, which is one of the most fundamental beliefs in Christianity.



Christianity teaches that God is constantly active in the world, and Christians sometimes use the word 'providence' to describe God's ongoing care for the universe in general and humanity in particular. Many Christians believe that God still makes miraculous events happen as part of his providence, though most would probably also say that while miracles are possible, they can't be expected and that having great faith does not mean that a miracle will necessarily happen. Believing that you have experienced or witnessed a miracle can be an extremely powerful religious experience which might prompt responses such as wonder, praise for God and a feeling of greater closeness to God.

Christians can look at the stories of the miracles in the Bible in different ways. If they look at a miracle literally, believing the story as it is written, then they might understand it to show God's power over sickness, wrongdoing, nature and death. They might also pick up metaphorical meanings from the miracles, and find that the stories give them insight into their own lives.

*Which of these responses to miracles are literal, which are metaphorical and which are sceptical (unbelieving of the miracles)?*

'As God helped the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt by parting the Red Sea, he will help people today find their own escape from things which trouble them.'

'Like in the story where Jesus calms the storm, he can help people today to calm storms within them if they are angry, or feel that they have been treated wrongly.'

'We can sometimes be 'blind' in how we see others and not value them as individuals. The healing of blind Bartimaeus reminds us that Jesus doesn't want us to be like that.'

'When Jesus rose from the dead while he was buried in his tomb, he showed that God has power over death, which means that God can save humans as well.'

'The 5,000 people were probably fed by the people in the crowd who had food following Jesus' example and sharing it in the same way he had shared his.'

'Jesus told the blind man that he was healed because of his faith. If we have faith in God, we will receive the rewards for that also.'

'When Jesus healed the blind beggar Bartimaeus, he showed his deep concern for the suffering that humans can experience, and his power to overcome it.'



Which of the following explanations for miracles do you think are:  
likely to be held by a Christian  
could possibly be held by a Christian  
unlikely to be held by a Christian  
impossible for a Christian to hold?

*'According to the laws of nature things like this simply don't happen, so the miracle stories must be false. It is more rational to believe that the stories have been made up than it is to believe that Jesus could break the laws of nature.'*

*'The miracles might have happened, because if Jesus was the Son of God, as he claimed to be, then he wouldn't have been limited by the laws of nature. He himself said that "There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything." (Luke chapter 18, verse 27)'*

*'We have a much better understanding of science than people who lived at the time when the Bible was written did, so we can use science to provide possible explanations for what happened in some miracles. What we can't use science to do is to prove that they did or didn't happen.'*

*'Something must have happened to have started the stories off, but they are probably exaggerated reports of surprising and unexpected events which are probably coincidences.'*

*'God is all-powerful and is constantly involved in the world, so miracles aren't God acting where he usually doesn't act, but God acting differently from how he usually acts.'*

*'An event can be understood by applying scientific ideas to it, and also as something that happened in history, and also can be understood as a miracle by people who believe in miracles.'*

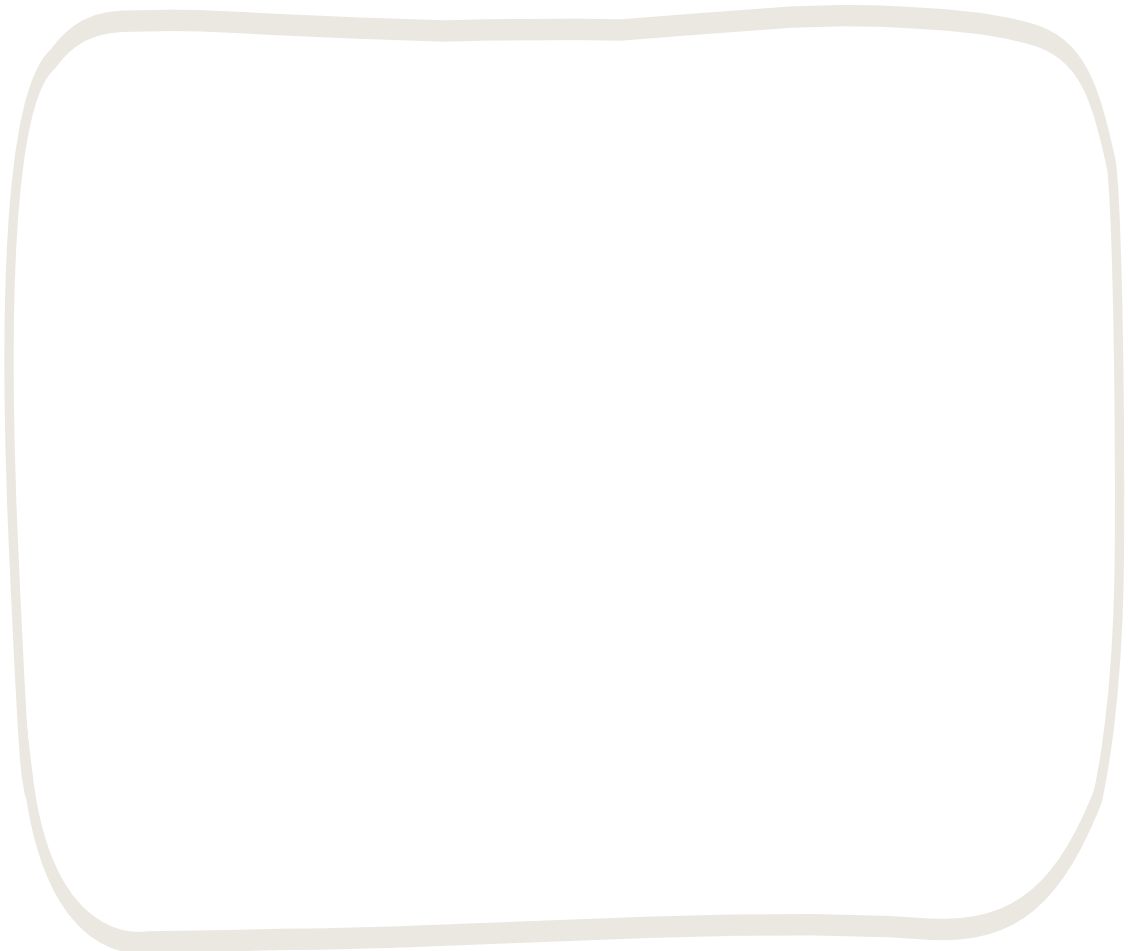




*Do you think that is it easier to accept some types of miracles than others? Try to use the three categories of miracles on p.1, healing miracles, miracles of provision (in which people receive things that they need) and miracles over nature, or examples from the Bible passages to help you to give your answer.*



*'Christianity teaches that when Jesus was resurrected, he proved that he had power over death and could bring salvation to humans. Therefore, the miracle of the resurrection should matter to Christians, but the other miracles are not important.'*  
*How far do you agree?*



*At the start of this resource, we used a definition of 'miracle' from a dictionary, which said that a miracle is 'A surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency.'*

*Use this space to write three new definitions of the word 'miracle'*

*A definition as it might be given by a Christian.*

*A definition as it might be given by someone who doesn't believe in miracles.*

*What you think the best definition of 'miracle' is.*

