

How Would You Prove That God Performed a Miracle?

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By Molly Worthen

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Josh Brown [directs](#) the program in neuroscience at Indiana University Bloomington. He has published dozens of articles on topics like the neural basis of decision making in the brain. He has wire-rimmed glasses and a calm, methodical way of speaking. And after almost two decades of keeping relatively quiet, he is now speaking openly about his most surprising research finding: He believes that God miraculously healed him of a brain tumor.

Christmas is a time when miracles happen, according to the Hallmark cards and cartoon specials. But Dr. Brown and his wife, Candy Gunther Brown, who did her doctorate in religious studies at Harvard and is also a professor at Indiana, believe that God does intervene to cause miraculous healing, all the time. Partly to understand the healing that shocked their family, they have traveled as far afield as Brazil and Mozambique to collect documentation purporting to link Christian prayers and revivals to sudden, inexplicable medical recoveries. But is it possible to prove that a miracle happened? Is it dangerous to even try?

We are not talking about metaphorical, wow-what-luck, “I can’t believe I got that parking space” sorts of miracles. The Browns seek out stories of healings that are impossible to account for by natural means, based on current medical knowledge (although they believe that God mostly heals through modern medicine). “I don’t see a conflict between investigating matters of neuroscience and investigating claims of divine healing,” Josh Brown told me. “The question is always empirical: What does the evidence say about what happened?”

Polls suggest that about [half](#) of American scientists and [three-quarters](#) of doctors believe in a higher power. But the Browns are among the few who refuse to compartmentalize their faith — who treat God’s supernatural action as a legitimate object of research. This can be unnerving, especially in an era of anti-vaxxers, climate change denialism and the [replication crisis](#) that has shaken the social and medical sciences. Public trust in scientific expertise is already wobbly.

But the Browns’ experiences and research — not to mention the abundance of healing testimony from other witnesses, especially outside the West — deserve serious consideration. Watertight proof of divine causation may be an impossible goal, but the search for it forces us to confront the assumptions that prop up our own worldviews — whether one is a devout believer or a committed skeptic.

Candy Brown was nine months pregnant when her husband had a seizure in the middle of the night. “I went to bed, and when I woke up the next morning, I was in an ambulance,” he said. Two and a half weeks later, newborn in tow, they got his diagnosis: an apparent brain tumor called a [glioma](#). (He provided The New York Times with medical records to support this account.) He was 30 years old. “Chemo, radiation and surgery don’t statistically prolong the life span with what I had. There was nothing to do but get ready to die, basically.”

Doctors prescribed no treatment other than anticonvulsant medication to manage symptoms.

The Browns grew up in Christian families but not the sort that expected God to intervene ostentatiously in modern life. Still, he was desperate. He started traveling the country seeking out Christian healing revivals, dragging along his wife and baby daughter. “I needed to find out what was going on,” he said. “If there was any reality to it, I wanted a miracle.”

Candy Brown recalled more disturbing details: the morning after her husband’s diagnosis, they began to pray together, but mentioning the name of Jesus seemed to trigger a frightening physical response. “Josh shoots out of bed, starts turning somersaults,” she said. “I’d say, try worshiping Jesus, and he couldn’t say the name Jesus. I was thinking of the herd of pigs,” she said, recalling the unlucky swine run off a cliff by demon possession in the Gospels. “He was hoarse and exhausted. For that 45 minutes, there was such a palpably evil presence in that room that hated the name of Jesus. If I ever had doubted whether Jesus was real, I couldn’t now.”

Josh Brown began traveling with healing missionaries. He told me he saw things he couldn’t explain — like a blind man on a street in Cuba who appeared to instantly regain his sight after missionaries prayed for him. Months later, after many sessions of prayer for healing and deliverance, an M.R.I. revealed that his tumor had turned into scar tissue.

He quickly volunteered to me that he never had a biopsy, but doctors often diagnose this type of tumor on the basis of M.R.I.s and the patient’s symptoms. “One way or another, the tumor went away,” he said. “I’ve been symptom-free for 19 years. The doctors said very little.” The Browns felt grateful — and perplexed. “At that point I wondered why, when I had seen so many things that seemed miraculous and difficult to explain, why was there so little careful investigation of these things?” he said.

In 2009, on a grant from the [John Templeton Foundation](#), the Browns flew to Mozambique to investigate the healing claims of [Global Awakening](#) and [Iris Global](#), two ministries focused on healing and revival. They brought audiometry equipment and eye charts to test people who requested prayer for deafness and blindness. The sample size was small — they tested 24 people — but they found statistically significant improvement beyond placebo effects and hypnosis.

“I was standing right there next to this woman who could not tell how many fingers were held up when you were a foot in front of her,” Candy Brown told me. “Then five minutes later, she’s reading an eye chart with a smile on her face.” She and her colleagues published the results in *The Southern Medical Journal* — not a prestigious publication but a respectable one with peer review — and she drew on the research for her 2012 [book](#), “Testing Prayer.”

Skeptics complained about the Browns’ methods and field conditions. They pointed out that the hearing tests were in a noisy setting, there was no control group and test subjects would naturally want to please those who prayed for them by showing results. “That simple trick explains why both hearing and sight appears to have dramatically improved among these poor, superstitious villagers,” one critic [declared](#). (The study [explained](#) in detail how the researchers did their best to weed out false data.)

If you want to evaluate people’s experiences at a revival in rural Africa, you probably need to give up on double-blind studies in a perfectly controlled environment. But let’s imagine for a moment that researchers could meet such standards (and that an all-powerful deity humors us and submits to this scrutiny). They might persuade skeptics that something strange happened. But is there any evidence that would persuade a nonbeliever that God was behind it — that we do not live in a closed system in which all causation is a matter of natural laws?

Christians have sought to scientifically evaluate miracle claims at least since the 16th century, when the Council of Trent tightened up the verification process for canonizing saints. But the Christian God does not work in randomized, repeatable trials. He works in history. So maybe medical histories are a more appropriate approach. “Medical case reports rely on a different epistemology, which is more of a historical epistemology,” Josh Brown said. “It’s not something you can necessarily recreate, whatever the time course of a disease.”

In 2011 the Browns helped found the Global Medical Research Institute, which [publishes](#) case studies on the small number of inexplicable events that its staff members can scrupulously document — like a blind [woman](#) who, while praying one night with her husband, regained her sight and a teenage [boy](#) who depended on a feeding tube until his stomach suddenly healed itself during an encounter with a Pentecostal minister. “When we write these case reports,

we're not claiming these must have been a miracle of God, but these are the facts of the case," Josh Brown told me.

Most professional scientists won't go for this. "Case methods are fine as a way to start," [Michael Shermer](#), the founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and a historian of science, told me. "But how do you shift from case studies to more experimental protocols that are the gold standard?"

Dr. Shermer sometimes asks believers about all the times prayer fails to heal. "Their answer is, 'God works in mysterious ways.' It's just hand-waving," he said. Divine mystery is central to Christian faith, but it creates problems for a scientific method premised on the assumption that the laws of cause and effect are uniform — and will yield up their mysterious ways if you test and measure again and again.

The Browns' experiences are striking because they operate in one of the most antisupernaturalist subcultures in the modern world: secular academia. But in a global context — and we are in the midst of a worldwide Christian revival — stories of unexplained healing in response to prayer are common. (Although healing is [central](#) to Christianity, other religions claim their share. One Christian response is that God shows himself to non-Christians in partial ways, and some Christians I interviewed described non-Christian healings that, they claimed, later proved false.)

Scholars [estimate](#) that 80 percent of new Christians in Nepal come to the faith through an experience with healing or deliverance from demonic spirits. Perhaps as many as 90 percent of new converts who join a house church in China credit their conversion to faith healing. In Kenya, 71 percent of Christians say they have witnessed a divine healing, according to a 2006 Pew study. Even in the relatively skeptical United States, 29 percent of survey respondents claim they have seen one.

You can quarrel with the exact figures, but we are talking about millions of people who say something otherworldly happened to them. Yet most secular people — and even many religious believers — are oblivious to this or shrug off miracle stories on principle as motivated reasoning, hallucination or fraud.

When Ifeanyi Chinedozi came to the United States for college in 2009, he "was shocked, as a young man from Nigeria, at the discomfort in talking about spiritual experiences and marvelous things that happen as part of routine

Christian discourse in Nigeria and across the world,” he told me. (According to Pew, 62 percent of Nigerians say they have witnessed a divine healing; 57 percent say they have experienced or seen an exorcism.)

Dr. Chinedozi went to medical school at Tufts University and is completing his residency in general surgery at the University of Maryland, as well as a cardiac surgery research fellowship at Johns Hopkins. He also leads a ministry called Healing Vessels International, which brings both prayer and medical resources to people in need. He has been a healing evangelist since the age of 7, when, he said, Jesus appeared to him in a dream and asked if he would like to heal people. His family was not Christian at the time, but after his frightened parents heard him speaking English in his sleep (they spoke only Igbo), they took him to a local minister, who proclaimed that the boy was anointed as a healer.

In 2007, when he was in high school, a family sought his help to raise their mother, who had been declared brain-dead at a hospital. He told me that he initially refused because he had tried and failed to raise someone from the dead before. Finally, he agreed to pray over a bottle of olive oil for them. “I lifted it up and said, ‘Father, let this represent me and be unto this girl and her family as their faith has demanded, in the name of Jesus Christ.’ They didn’t thank me, just rushed out, and I thought, ‘I don’t have to go with them and be embarrassed. Whatever happens happens.’”

He heard later that the woman’s daughter poured the whole bottle onto her while praying; the woman coughed and opened her eyes. The family gave a party to celebrate her recovery, where Dr. Chinedozi said he met her.

God instituted prayer “to communicate to his creatures the dignity of causality,” according to Blaise Pascal, the 17th-century French philosopher. But for those whose prayers are answered, there is a temptation to take credit. Dr. Chinedozi told me that his family and friends address him as “man of God,” but he stressed that the woman’s recovery proved he has no special powers, not even superhuman faith. “People say God only works when you have faith,” he told me. “I don’t think that’s true. God sometimes overrides our unbelief and high-mindedness and proves himself to be God. He doesn’t need our faith to be God.”

Why are stories like this so much more common outside the West? Skeptics say that naturally, people pray more often and overinterpret lucky breaks when

they don't have antibiotics or doctors close by — although the raising that Dr. Chinedozi described took place in a hospital. In the Bible, humans see wondrous signs of God's power where the Gospel is spreading to new lands, and Jesus refuses to perform magic tricks for skeptical Pharisees but heals those whose desperation drives them to faith.

J. Ayodeji Adewuya is a professor of New Testament at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Tennessee. He saw his share of miracles in his home country, Nigeria — including, he believes, the raising of his stillborn infant son after he spent 20 minutes shouting and pacing the room in prayer. “I joke, you don't really need to pray the Lord's Prayer, ‘Give us our daily bread,’ when you have everything provided by Walmart and your fridge is full,” he told me. “When you're in a place where you have nothing, the only thing you can do is depend on God, and at that point you're expecting something. The average white evangelical Christian doesn't expect anything.”

Western skeptics have disregarded witness testimony from places like Nigeria at least since David Hume complained in his 1748 [essay](#) on miracles that “they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.” Such dismissal is more awkward for 21st-century secular liberals, who often say that Westerners should listen to people in the Global South and acknowledge the blindnesses of colonialism. “Some people claim that the best thing to do is to listen to people's experiences and learn from them,” Dr. Chinedozi said. “Yet these people will be the first to find a way to disprove experiences in other cultures and contexts.”

Witness testimony in general has come in for a drubbing lately. Courts have overturned convictions when DNA proved that witnesses who sounded sure of themselves on the stand turned out to be horribly [mistaken](#). Yet we rely on it all the time in the course of ordinary life. “If your epistemology is that eyewitness evidence doesn't count, then there goes most historiography, journalism, even anthropology and sociology,” Craig Keener, a professor of biblical studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, told me. (He included Dr. Chinedozi's and Dr. Adewuya's stories in his [book](#) “Miracles Today.”)

Among those who deny miracles, “the presuppositions are so strong,” Dr. Keener said. “There's a dogmatism there, just like a religious dogmatism. It looks to me like it's so ideologically driven — if you're starting from the standpoint that a miracle claim is not true if we could possibly come up with another explanation and one of the explanations can be, ‘We don't have an

explanation now, but maybe someday we will.” When I asked Dr. Shermer what he thought about this analogy, he objected. Belief in future scientific discovery “is not faith,” he said. “It’s confidence that the system works pretty well from experience.”

Well-documented testimonies can suggest that something very strange happened, but they can never settle the crucial question of causation; this is, whether you are religious or not, a matter of faith. (Even Hume, [in a way](#), granted this.) So do efforts to prove miracles miss the point — and miss other signs of God’s presence?

I put this question to Kim O’Connor, a nurse, and Hamilton Grantham, a pediatrician, who help lead the [British Lourdes Medical Association](#), a group of medical professionals who accompany critically ill pilgrims to the Catholic shrine of Lourdes in France. They described startling cases of cancer remission and unresponsive people with dementia getting up to dance. But most of their stories emphasized internal transformation, the acceptance of approaching death by pilgrims and their families. “A lot of people we take are too humble for themselves. They don’t expect a miraculous cure,” Ms. O’Connor said.

The Catholic Church has officially [acknowledged](#) 70 miraculous healings associated with Lourdes since pilgrims began traveling there in 1858, but “they’re the small pinnacle of a much bigger blessing,” Dr. Grantham said. “The reality is that when we think of ourselves as doctors and nurses, as people who want to heal, healing comes in many different forms.”

If God can heal, why does he do it so rarely? The world is full of suffering people who pray with no relief. “Even people who believe in miracles often don’t pray for them because they’re afraid of disappointment,” Candy Brown said. “I’ve had people die on my watch. It’s incredibly painful. You ask, ‘Is it my fault?’” She speculated that many Christians’ belief that miraculous healing ceased after New Testament times springs from “protection against pain, protection against feeling ill will toward God or other people. It takes hope and vulnerability to be open to healing.”

For Christians, it also takes spiritual maturity to remember that miracles are not the point. Miracles are signs meant to help humans see the greatest miracle of all, the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ— God’s ultimate intrusion into ordinary life, by which he eventually “shall wipe away all tears,” according to the Book of Revelation.

For now, stories of suffering in this fallen world vastly outnumber reports of miraculous healing; believers must search out God's power in all these things. William Dembski is a Christian writer and proponent of intelligent design who completed a doctorate in mathematics at the University of Chicago (and later one in philosophy). He is an expert in probability theory, so he is well aware that statistically rare things do happen randomly.

"I believe in miracles, but I think they require scrutiny," Dr. Dembski told me. "I don't tend to see things as flamboyant as in the New Testament." He published a moving [account](#) of his family's disappointment at a healing revival, where he sought prayer for his autistic son. "There can be quite a bit of self-delusion on the part of people looking for miracles, and it troubles me," he said.

Dr. Dembski's family has learned to look for the miraculous in everyday loving encounters, like when a teacher's aide made it her mission to help his son learn to use the bathroom on his own. "His life is so much better because of this person who wouldn't give up on him," he said. "It was no miracle, in terms of a magic wand that touched him and everything was fine. It was people who were willing to love him and do the hard work."

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/24/opinion/miracles-neuroscience-proof.html>

Good luck to all such folk trying to make headway in secular scientific academic arenas. Gaining tenure is to never have to accommodatingly learn from anyone else again. I know that's unfair to a lot of good people in academics, but ... Anyone with in-depth experience in places like rural Africa knows there is truth in this. If they don't, they weren't listening or watching. A complication is that "healing" happens charismatically with agents not necessarily "Christian," or even benign. It was so in New Testament times if you read the Gospels carefully. The demonic messes around in this arena having great sport and gaining advantage. Many "healers" are themselves "possessed," often peaceably so, and use their powers to establish and maintain parasitic relationships with vulnerable acolytes; so many have had abusers damage their internal boundaries leaving them prey to "praying" charismatics (understood in the general sense as well as the evangelical one). To understate it grossly, sorting it all out is not simple or easy to do. Mercifully, though the demonic may be relentless, regularly making fools of us all, including me, it will always ultimately remain contingent and second-order in time, place, and power. TJB