Q&A: How do you reconcile the belief that God moves supernaturally as well as naturally?

Anonymous asks: *I have been struggling with how to believe and have faith in the God I know who is the God of the every day things and the God who is also supernatural. How do you approach it? Reconciling the belief that God moves supernaturally as well as through the ordinary?*

Thank you for a very interesting question. It has given me pause for thought.

My first pause has been to cogitate about the dichotomy in the premise of your question: On the one hand we have "supernatural" acts of God, and on the other hand we have "natural" acts of God. I wonder if it is a false dichotomy?

Scripture affirms, and we can clearly see by rational observation, that natural processes are at work in this world. The sun rises and sets, electricity flows predictably, biological occurrences are explainable etc. etc. None of this is surprising.

How, then does God "move" in these "ordinary" things. He certainly does this by creating the ordinariness to begin with. The ordinary creation thus speaks of his design, goodness and purpose. It is not wrong to consider the fruit of the harvest as a providential gift from God – how wonderful that he has so moved in creation as to set up this system of providence! And so we can look at the sunset, or the spider's web, or the intricacy of a flower, or the magnificence of the rolling spheres, and grow in our awareness of the potentate of

time. This I think is what we are talking about, precisely, when we talk about God moving “in” the natural.

And Scripture also affirms “supernatural” moves of God – various miracles involving matters of physical health, the suspension or occurrence of phenomena where they would or wouldn’t otherwise occur, the receipt of information or understanding through some form of direct revelation rather than “natural” observation and conversation. The Scriptural narrative reveals that God does directly intervene in the created order of things.

Clearly these are conceptually distinct, but they are not incompatible, and in fact I don’t think they can be separated.

After all, the “supernatural” acts of God, apart from creation itself, are not *ex nihilo* – they are acts within the created order. Yes, it’s a miracle when God parts the waters of the red sea, but he is not doing something that is conceptually absurd, or impossible to understand: he is moving water out of the way, he is acting *within* the natural, it is understandable. He does the impossible but graspable (the feasible impossible?). When Jesus heals it is not some weird and wacky thing whereby the recipient is enveloped by a spiritual dimension outside of creation, it is simply that the broken thing is fixed, the disordered thing is reordered and so on.

And similarly, when God speaks “supernaturally” – be it in a dream, a vision, or the various other forms of communication that we see in Scripture – he does so using language (an aspect of creation) and ideas and concepts that are not incompatible with the created order, but are integral to it and connect to it.

So without God moving supernaturally in the first place there would be no natural, and without the natural the supernatural acts would have no context, no mechanism, and no application.

They cannot be separated.

So what's to reconcile?

I think the difficulty comes when we consider our own personal journey through life. That journey is a natural journey – we were born, we grow, we experience the good and bad of every day as the rain falls on the righteous and the evil alike. On that journey we face decisions and predicaments and problems. We search out frameworks and information in order to make those decisions, we look for solutions to the predicaments and problems.

The "natural" aspect of that framework is to engage with those aspects that are universal or common to all (so-called common grace and common sense play their part). And so when someone is sick we make the decision to go to the doctor – that is common sense, and the fact that there is a doctor to go to is a providential common grace. But we might also ask God for the person to be healed "supernaturally" and that may or may not happen. And I'm not even sure if we could tell most of the time. Perhaps if the person is suddenly well without any "natural" intervention we would easily call that a miracle. But what if the person simply recovered quicker-than-most after treatment, or avoided a worst case scenario, or was discovered to have some more minor problem than the major disease that was feared, or didn't respond to treatment at all but suffered and died… at what point has the miracle stopped and the "natural" taken over? I don't think you can draw that line. But it doesn't stop me exercising common sense, and drawing on the common grace provided through the doctor, as well as praying for a specific extraordinary grace for the moment.

Similarly, if I need to make a decision I might ask God for guidance. That may or may not (usually not!) involve a flash of lightning, a vision, a dream, or even an immediate sense of assurance. It will involve the weighing of things both

intellectually and emotionally, a cogitation, an investigation, a playing out of hypotheticals and a weighing of the possible results. Where is the line which on one side I say "God told me" and on the other side I say "I decided"? I don't think it can be drawn. "It seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit" is a perceptive remark methinks.

So what's to reconcile? The natural and the supernatural work together. I pray. I decide. I rejoice in God's providential blessings, both the natural and supernatural and the usual conglomeration of the two that makes up our interaction with the divine. My worship may involve being lifted up on angel's wings, but just as readily be a simple "being," thankfully responding to the basking sunlight and the turning of the seasons. All of it is still worship.

Even the act of the cross is a mixture of both "natural" and "supernatural." Jesus dies as any human person who is crucified would die. His resurrection is nothing short of a miracle. But they are not at odds with one another. The resurrection understood is not a rejection of reality it is the beginning of a new creation, a new "natural" – or perhaps the "natural" as it is intended to operate for eternity. Jesus is the firstfruits of this new creation.

Our calling as Christians is not a calling to the "supernatural" as such, but a calling to the new "natural" that is in Jesus. We are to put off the old ways and clothe ourselves with the things that naturally pertain to eternal resurrected life. These are not strange things, they are matters of faith and understanding and virtue that are understandable and graspable. Whether or not that is played out in this life through miraculous interventions or ordinary obedience, I don't particularly care and I can't particularly distinguish. All I know that however it looks, those who are living according to their new nature are doing so because the Holy Spirit is at work in them and I trust for the day when that is the most natural thing in the world.