

Why believe in miracles?

By Dr. Jim Denison

When President John Kennedy entertained a group of Nobel Prize winners in the White House in December of 1962, he welcomed them as the most distinguished gathering of talents ever assembled in the Executive Mansion, except when Thomas Jefferson dined there alone.

Jefferson was indeed a Renaissance man. Conversant in English, French, Spanish, Latin, and Greek, he was easily able to read the New Testament in its original language. He was fascinated with the ethical teachings of Jesus. He believed that their "system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime...ever taught, and consequently more perfect than those of any of the ancient philosophers."¹

However, Jefferson mourned that the task of preserving these teachings "fell on the most unlettered and ignorant men; who wrote, too, from memory, and not till long after the transactions had passed." As a result, "the doctrines which he really delivered were defective as a whole, and fragments only of what he did deliver have come to us mutilated, misstated, and often unintelligible."²

The "mutilated" record of Jesus' life and work included miraculous elements which Jefferson could not reconcile with his deistic worldview. God was to him the Creator of the universe who did not meddle in the affairs of his creation. He allowed the world to function according to the natural laws he incorporated into its operations. And so Jefferson considered himself "a Christian, in the only sense he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; and believing he never claimed any other."³

Consequently, Jefferson removed from the Gospels every reference to the miraculous, preserving only Jesus' ethical statements. The resulting "Jefferson Bible" ends thus: "There laid they Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed."⁴

Thomas Jefferson was not the first or the last to reject biblical authority because of its claims to record the miraculous. There was a time when the science/faith debate led many to believe that acceptance of miracles was intellectually naïve, if not dangerous. Now things are a bit different. The postmodern movement has opened the door for

1 Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) 5.

2 Ibid., 11.

3 Ibid., 30.

4 Ibid., 147.

"spirituality" of all kinds, whether it is based on miracles or not. Such claims can be "my" truth without being "your" truth.

However, I still speak often with people who struggle to reconcile scientific materialism with the biblical narratives. They do not believe people can walk on water today, so they wonder how to accept the New Testament claim that Jesus did. They have not witnessed incontrovertible proof of divine healing, and struggle with biblical statements that Jesus performs such miracles.

Several years ago, I spent some extended time with a geologist who was visiting our church and considering Christianity. His great struggle was that he could not reconcile his knowledge of our planet's origins with what he had been told was the biblical account of creation. He could not trust in Christ as his Lord, if he could not trust the book which revealed Christ to him.

What would you say to a person who denies the miraculous? Let's discuss the supernatural and its relationship to your soul today.

The importance of miracles

C. S. Lewis defines a "miracle" as "an interference with Nature by supernatural power."⁵ At the very beginning of his discussion he sets out the terms of the debate: some believe that nothing exists but Nature ("naturalists"), while others believe that something besides Nature exists ("supernaturalists"). The question is: which is right?⁶

From its very beginnings, the biblical worldview has argued for supernaturalism. "Signs," "wonders," and "power" are found in both the Old and New Testaments. Miraculous "signs" confirmed Moses' authority (Exodus 3:12; 4:3-8), and God's message (Judges 6:17; Isaiah 38:7; Jeremiah 44:29). "Wonders" accompanied signs (Exodus 7:3; Deuteronomy 26:8), and were called "wonders" (Exodus 4:21). Miraculous "powers" defeated the enemies of God's people (Ex 15:6-7; Numbers 14:17), and were used with "signs" and "wonders".

In the New Testament, Jesus' miracles were "signs" (John 2:11; 6:2; 9:16; 11:47), as were the apostles' miraculous acts (Acts 2:43; 4:16, 30; 8:13; 14:3) and the resurrection (Matthew 12:39-40). "Wonders" are found 16 times, always with "signs" (Matthew 24:24; John 4:48; Acts 6:8; 14:3). And we find the "power" of Satan (Luke 10:19; Romans 8:38), of miracles (Mt 11:20; 13:58; Lk 1:35; 1 Corinthians 12:10), and of the gospel itself (Ro 1:16).⁷

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) 10.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook of Christian Evidences* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1990) 88.

Jesus' ministry was validated in large part by the miracles he performed. He claimed that "the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me" (John 5:36). Part of this "work" was "the miracles I do in my Father's name" (Jn 10:25).

When John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he were really the Messiah, "at that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor'" (Luke 7:21-22).

Jesus appealed to his skeptics, "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:37-38). He made the same appeal to his disciples: "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (Jn 14:11).

Early Christians understood the significance of miracles for Jesus' divinity and movement. Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254) claimed that the apostles would have gained no hearing without miracles. Justin the Martyr (executed ca. 165) argued for a Christ who healed the sick and raised the dead. Athanasius (ca. 296-373) claimed that Jesus proved his divinity by his miracles. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-95) stated that Jesus' miracles convinced his followers of his divinity.⁸

From the New Testament to today, those who affirm the biblical worldview accept the category of the supernatural. We believe that biblical miracles were sensible events, verifiable to the eye and/or ear. They required the presence of the supernatural, not merely the improbable. And they were performed within a redemptive context. They were not ends in themselves, but were intended to lead their recipients and witnesses to spiritual realities.

Without the possibility of miracles, the whole purpose of the Christian faith is defeated. The biblical worldview is not a mere life philosophy. Rather, believers are convinced that the gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). If God cannot or will not do the supernatural, no soul can be set free from hell for heaven, transformed from death to life.

Salvation is itself a miracle of the highest magnitude. If Thomas Jefferson was right and the Creator does not intervene in his creation, then "Christ has not been raised, either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins...If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor 15:16-17, 19).

⁸ Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984) 4. Brown's defense of miracles stands with C. S. Lewis's *Miracles* as perhaps the finest on our subject available today.

To deny the supernatural is to deny the divine authority of Scripture, and the transforming faith it reveals and promotes. Nothing less than our eternal destiny is at stake.

Arguing over the supernatural

For some 15 centuries, the Western world took the category of miracles largely for granted. If the Church taught that God works miracles, then he does. If he created the universe, he can intervene in his creation whenever he wishes.

In the last four centuries, however, intellectual wars have raged over the issue of supernaturalism. We'll look at each of the battles in turn, listening to the critic of the supernatural and then defending the miraculous.

Miracles are impossible

The first major attack on supernaturalism would not come until the 17th century. Benedict de Spinoza (1632-77) argued that all of reality is embraced within a single, rational substance. His pantheism viewed God as all that is. God must be immutable to be God; thus all reality is equally immutable. An unchangeable reality must operate according to unchanging laws. But miracles change the laws of nature. Therefore, miracles cannot exist.

Spinoza's mindset is still defended by deists like Jefferson, and by materialists who deny the spiritual or divine altogether. Jefferson would say that God does not violate the laws by which his universe operates. A materialistic atheist would say that there is no possibility of the "supernatural" within the natural, so that God cannot exist. The result is the same: miracles are by definition impossible.

One response to this critique is to expose its presuppositions. If a skeptic begins by denying the ability or willingness of the Creator to intervene in his creation, of course miracles are impossible. If God does not exist, obviously he cannot do the supernatural. But such an argument does not answer the question—it begs it. It is no solution to deny the existence of the problem.

Antony Flew's "falsification principle" is worth considering in this regard. Flew claimed that Christianity is irrational, since nothing can falsify its beliefs. According to his critique, Christians will allow no evidence or logic to refute their faith.⁹ Of course, Paul identified the ultimate falsification of the Christian movement: "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14).

It seems to me that Flew's thesis is more damaging to materialism than to supernaturalism. The skeptic who begins his argument by the *de facto* denial of the supernatural cannot allow any evidence to count against his presupposition. If Jesus

⁹ Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification" in *The Existence of God*, ed. John Hick (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 224-8.

could not be raised from the dead, for instance, all arguments citing the empty tomb and changed lives of the disciples are of no avail.

A person who can admit no criteria by which his or her position can be refuted is not defending a rational argument, but a mere opinion.

Miracles are implausible

David Hume, the 18th century Scottish philosopher known to history as the "father of skepticism," was especially skeptical about miracles. His work on the subject made clear his doubts.

Hume was willing to admit the plausibility of a miracle, if those who claim to witness it meet certain criteria.¹⁰ Those who claim to have seen the miraculous must be:

- Numerous; the more who see the miracle, the more likely their testimony. A hermit living in a mountain cave who witnesses a UFO is less believable than a crowd who sees the same phenomenon.
- Intelligent; a person of limited intellect might struggle to understand the "miracle" that I can type on this box and produce printed documents.
- Educated; to those who have never learned about airplanes, one flying overhead is a miracle of the highest significance.
- Of unquestioned integrity; the person selling his encounter with an alien is less credible than one with nothing to profit.
- Willing to undergo severe loss if wrong; the more insistent and sacrificial the witness, the more likely her story. People don't die for a lie.
- In a region of the world where the story can be validated; claims that drinking water at the House of Mary outside Ephesus possess healing powers are more credible for those who are able to visit the shrine and witness its effects.

Hume believed that no eyewitness to the miraculous could withstand such scrutiny. Of course, he was wrong. Those who witnessed the resurrected Christ meet each of Hume's criteria:

- Numerous: more than 500 saw the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:6).
- Intelligent: several of the apostles owned and operated a fishing business (Luke 5:1-11); another was a tax-collector, a demanding intellectual profession (Matthew 9:9); Paul was one of the most brilliant scholars of his day.
- Educated: Paul was trained by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), a man of "great learning" (Acts 26:24). The other disciples were schooled in the Scriptures, able to quote at length from memory. The Sanhedrin's assessment that the disciples were "unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13) meant only that they had not attended rabbinic schools.
- Of unquestioned integrity: of all the criticisms brought against Christians in the book of Acts, no skeptic thought to attack their character. They were known even to their enemies to be people of honesty.

¹⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1966 [1907] 128-9.

- Willing to undergo severe loss: all but John were martyred, and he was exiled on the prison island of Patmos.
- Able to be validated: Joseph of Arimathea's empty tomb was available to any who wished to see it. Paul could say of Agrippa, "The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26).

Miracles are implausible only to those whose presuppositions render them so. If, on the other hand, the Creator of the earth is also a loving Father to its residents, he will want a personal relationship with his children. No father can watch his family impassively as a clockmaker watches his invention run down. He will intervene in their lives often.

If there is a personal God who desires relationship with us, deistic naturalism is far less plausible than supernaturalism.

Accepting miracles would cause us to abandon science¹¹

Science operates according to certain empirical laws. Its method begins with a theory, which is then tested. If the data support the theory, the experiment is repeated. Only if repeatable evidence supports the theory, is it considered valid.

Miracles are by definition not subject to this method. A woman in the first church I pastored was told she had pancreatic cancer and given three months to live. We prayed fervently for her. The next week she returned to her doctor, who could find no evidence of the malignancy. We believed that God worked a miracle. A scientist would need to repeat the conditions which led to this occurrence, before making such a judgment. Because miracles are not testable and repeatable, they are not "scientific."

As a result, some believe they cannot admit the possibility of the miraculous and remain true to the scientific worldview. But such a conclusion is hardly warranted. No relationship can be verified by a test tube, especially a personal relationship with the God of the universe. A physicist can no more test and verify her husband's love for her children than she can her heavenly Father's love for his.

A woman once told me that she would come to my church if I could prove that God loves us. I asked her to prove that her husband loves her. She smiled and said, "He tells me that he does." I told her that he could be lying. She described loving things he did for her. I replied that he could be manipulating and misleading her. Finally she said, "You'd have to be part of my family to understand." I said, "You'd have to be part of my Father's family to understand as well."

Miracles must be seen within the Christian context if they are to be given a fair hearing. Those who deny the miraculous by definition have obviously disqualified themselves as

¹¹ For further discussion see Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1994) 109-14.

interpreters of claims to the miraculous. Science and history are treatments of the natural order. The *supernatural* is by definition beyond their realm of investigation.

Miracles are an outdated concept

Still other skeptics argue that miracles are leftover vestiges of an earlier era. Those who accept this argument make strange bedfellows, indeed.

Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, proponents of atheistic materialism, taught that miracles are supernaturalistic wishes and nothing more. Since religion is the opiate of the people, its claim to perform miracles is a means of subjugating its believers. Those who hold onto the possibility of miracles are superstitious and naïve.

Dispensationalists argue that miracles are outdated, but for completely different reasons. This theological method divides biblical history into different "dispensations," periods of time in which God dealt with humanity in ways appropriate to that era. In this view, miracles ended with the early church. We now live in a post-apostolic era in which miracles are no longer necessary.

Some Calvinists share this rejection of miracles, for a third reason. Miracles were needed to establish the truth of Christian revelation, but are no longer needed today. In fact, they diminish the glory of God by suggesting that he must intervene in his imperfect creation.

Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most famous New Testament scholars of the 20th century, argued that miracles are outdated for yet a fourth reason. In his view, miracles are part of the first-century, pre-scientific worldview. As such, they act as stumbling blocks to the scientific age we are called to reach with the gospel. And so we need to reinterpret them spiritually, removing them as objections to faith.

Bultmann was clear: "Man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world."¹² We know that people do not "descend into hell" or "ascend into heaven." This three-tiered view of the universe must be replaced with the scientific model espoused today.

To remove these mythological problems, Bultmann proposed that we "demythologize" the biblical text. Jesus' walking on water is the victory of faith over the storms of doubt. Easter is the resurrection of faith in the disciples. By this approach we do not invalidate the gospel—we communicate it effectively to a new era.

Of course, Feuerbach and Marx deny the existence of the supernatural by definition. Their approach begs the question, and has already been discussed. Dispensational and Calvinist theologians cannot cite scriptural support for their rejection of contemporary miracles. Their position is the logical conclusion of their presuppositions, not biblical

12 Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961) 4.

argument. It would be wrong for God to intervene in his creation only if he told us that he would not. And in fact, he assures us of just the opposite. If the Son could become man, the most complete insertion of divinity into humanity, any other supernatural act by his Father is possible.

Bultmann's program is not as attractive to scholars as it was a generation ago. We now know that the miraculous elements of the biblical worldview are foundational to its claims. We cannot spiritualize the historical elements of the story without losing all foundation in fact and experience. And without its historical foundations, a faith which worships One "which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched" (1 John 1:1) cannot stand.

In fact, changes in the scientific worldview over the last half-century have brought about a remarkable change in the way many scientists view the supernatural. Newtonian physics sought to explain the universe in terms of predictable mechanical causality. According to this approach, the world operates by "laws" which cannot be broken; hence miracles cannot occur.

But with Einstein's theory of relativity, these "laws" are considerably less binding on scientific exploration. Indeed, there has occurred a "radical reorientation in knowledge in which structure and matter, form and being are inseparably fused together, spelling the end of the analytical era in science."¹³

Paradox is now a reality in scientific theory. For instance, physicists still debate the means by which light travels—particle or wave? A college science major attending one of my classes at Southwestern Seminary told us that in his lab the professor said, "Light travels as particle on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. It travels as wave on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. On Sunday it can do whatever it likes." This paradox is known as "Bohr's principle of complementarity."

Albert Einstein himself concluded, "You will find it surprising that I think of the comprehensibility of the world...as a miracle."¹⁴ He was right again.

Where you get on is where you get off

The debate over miracles reduces to presuppositions. If we assume that God does not exist, or is an impersonal entity, or cannot or will not intervene in his creation, we have ruled out the possibility of the miraculous. If we assume that God does exist, that he is

13 T. F. Torrance, "The Church in the New Era of Scientific and Cosmological Change," *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 270. See also his *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 61-3.

14 Albert Einstein, quoted by Stanley L. Jaki, "Theological Aspects of Creative Science," *Creation, Christ and Culture--Studies in Honor of T. F. Torrance*, ed. Richard W. A. McKinney (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976) 164.

personal, and that he can and will intervene in the creation he owns, we have accepted the possibility of miracles. Which presupposition is more credible?

I would of course argue for supernaturalism, but not just because of my own experience with a personal, active God. You may well consider my experience to be misguided, manipulated, or misinterpreted. But consider the following objective facts.

One: those who have never experienced miracles are by definition unqualified to pass judgment on their existence or nature. Miracles, like all experiences, are most credible to those who encounter them firsthand. It is impossible for a blind person to experience "red," or for a hearing impaired person to experience music. We can explain light and sound spectra all morning long, but the person may continue to reject the existence of color and sound. A blind scholar is less qualified to judge a new work of visual art than an uneducated sighted person.

Thomas Sherlock made a similar point nearly two centuries ago. In arguing for the miraculous, he asked whether it would be legitimate for anyone living in a warm climate to believe in the existence of ice.¹⁵ Growing up in Houston, Texas, my personal experience would require me to reject completely the possibility of an ice storm. In this light, a spiritual skeptic is less qualified to discuss the miraculous than one who has experienced personally the supernatural God.

Two: miracles are more probable than improbable. Science works with probabilities, not absolute certainties. Parallel lines never intersect, we're told; but we'd have to draw them forever to prove the assertion. In the calculation of "pi," three successive "sevens" do not appear. At least so far, in the millions of places to which the number has been calculated. But we cannot be sure.

Scientists must content themselves with probabilities. So let's ask: is it more or less probable that something miraculous sparked the Christian movement? Is it likely that men who were too afraid of the authorities to stand at Jesus' cross would soon die on their own rather than abandon their belief in his resurrection? That a scattered, frightened group of fugitives would lead a movement which would replace the Roman Empire as the dominant force in the Western hemisphere? That a faith held by just a few hundred would today be cherished by a third of the world's population? Is it more probable that this movement is founded on the lie that Jesus rose from the dead, or on the truth of his resurrection and divinity?

Three: miracles are part of that dimension of experience which is not susceptible to scientific verification. Scientists limit themselves to the proper method for the subject to be investigated. Test tubes work in chemistry, not quantum physics.

In the same way, it is important for us to use the proper tools in discussing the supernatural. In this regard, Ian Ramsey, a philosopher of language, makes a helpful

15 Brown 57-8.

distinction between the "first order" and "second order" of divine activity in the world.¹⁶ In the "first order," God is generally active in the universe. Here he operates according to natural, physical laws. The language of science is appropriate for describing and investigating the results of his creative activity.

In the "second order," God operates personally within his creation. Here his activity by definition is not subject to the natural laws which typically govern his universe. Since science can work only within these laws, it is unable to comprehend divine activity which transcends them.

Such inability is not the fault of science, but rather a result of its assigned field of study. We don't criticize a poet when her descriptions violate accepted laws of physical reality. We don't reject the laws of physics because they are unable to predict the behavior of people in love.

Science and faith are no more at odds than geography and landscape art. Both describe the world from their own perspective. Neither is subject to the limitations of the other.

Conclusion

J. B. Phillip's classic description of contemporary theology is appropriately titled, *Your God Is Too Small*. Phillips traces some of the most popular pictures of God today: a resident policeman, passing out tickets to unsuspecting motorists; a "parental hangover" from our days as children; a "grand old man" who has little to do with his grandchildren; a "meek-and-mild" Jesus who would never judge or condemn us; and "God-in-a-box," limited to our understanding and experience.

Phillips concludes his argument for the miraculous God of Scripture by answering the charge: "Critics often complain that if the world is in its present state after nineteen centuries of Christianity, then it cannot be a very good religion." He points out that Christianity has never been in a position to control the "state of the world." Then he makes an assertion especially appropriate to our subject:

They misunderstand the nature of Christianity. It is not to be judged by its success or failure to reform the world which rejects it. If it failed *where it is accepted* there might be grounds for complaint, but it does not so fail. It is a revelation of the true way of living, the way to know God, the way to live life of eternal quality, and is not to be regarded as a handy social instrument for reducing juvenile delinquency or the divorce rate...The religion of Jesus Christ changes people (if they are willing to pay the price of being changed) so that they quite naturally and normally live as "sons and daughters of God," and of course they exert an excellent influence on the community. But if real

¹⁶ Ibid., 183-8.

Christianity fails, it fails for the same reasons that Christ failed—and any condemnation rightly falls on the world which rejects both Him and it.¹⁷

The miraculous nature of the Christian faith is not to be judged by those who reject its message and power. In fact, they are in the worst possible position to render an appropriate verdict. Those who have experienced the miraculous God personally know that his word changes lives. They know that they can trust the authority of the Scriptures, for they have met their Author. And they say with the blind man, "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:25).

We know the sun exists on a cloudy day, not because we can see it, but because we can see everything else in its light.

17 J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1972 [1961]) 123-4.