

Sermon 24: The Objection to Miracles

OUTLINE

Rejection of miracles

Defence of miracles

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common reasons why people reject Christianity today is because the modern person rejects miracles on principle. There is a common retort that the modern person who is educated and has benefitted from all the progress of science and can cast our eye over history to all the negative effects of religion can happily put ignorant and superstitious thinking away and boldly accept that there is no such thing as miracles. It is common to have a conversation with someone who says that the miracle of the virgin birth is false, or a borrowed myth to make Jesus out to be something He wasn't. Or that when Jesus walked on water He only appeared to be walking on water when in fact He was walking on a sand bank just under the surface. Or when Jesus fed the 5000, He did not miraculously produce food, but rather the generosity of the little boy shamed the crowd into sharing their travel provisions which proved to be more than enough. Or that Jesus swooned and did not die and resurrect. This sort of thinking has gained a lot of momentum with the New Atheists, Richard Dawkins has even written a children's book trying to get kids to think that miracles cannot happen.

We will begin by looking at all the ways people deny miracles and then make our defence.

Rejection of miracles

There have been several ways in which miracles has been rejected in the 17th and 18th century something called Deism arose, this was the syncretism between Christianity and the new science that was developing. With the discovery of certain mechanisms in nature, it was seen more as a machine or a clock rather than something upheld by God's constant providential action. The idea was that God made the clock, wound it up, the various systems in nature are the various cogs and springs, and would not interfere in it after He had brought it into existence. Some perceived it to be an insult or interference.

Benedict Spinoza was a philosopher who objected to miracles. He has a certain deterministic view of God that made nature the necessary outworking of God's will. So if God interfered in nature, then He would be denying Himself. He argued that the harmony of nature is an argument for God, but miracles counterintuitively promote doubt in nature and therefore God and promote atheism. He preferred to think of any so called miracles as works of nature that we did not yet understand. This sort of thinking of course appeals to any who want to look at the Bible and see its talk of demonic possession or satanic causes of disease as an ignorant superstitious and spiritualizing way to explain what they did not understand.

David Hume is a famous sceptic who wrote a famous work on miracles. His thinking went something like this. The rational person makes a distinction between proof that makes a thing certain, and proof that only makes a thing probable. In order for a thing to be proof it basically has to be incontestable. When it comes to miracles Hume would have us picture a scale in our minds. On the one side of the scale we have a once off occurrence we call a miracle, lets say the virgin birth. But on the other side of the scale is every other instance

of a baby being made by the natural means of sperm and egg. On the basis of this scale, miracles cannot be admitted as proof. On the basis of Hume's thinking they are disqualified by definition. He gives the example of Queen Elizabeth dying, being raised from the dead one month later and ruling for another three years. By his way of evaluating whether miracles are true he says he would rather believe any number of other theories than that she had resurrected from the dead.

There is a second step in his argument. He says that in most instances we do not have a nice clean clear instance of a well recorded and well attested miracle, the evidence put in the scale is less than one clear and accepted miracle. He gives the four following reasons why all the accounts we have of miracles do not make up one good account of a miracle. Firstly, no miracle is sufficiently reported by educated men of station who would have much to lose for lying. Secondly, people are gullible and are too ready to believe in superstitious explanations. Thirdly, miracles only happen among Barbarians not the educated. Fourthly, all religions have miracles which they say attest to their religion, these all cancel each other out.

These attitudes have filtered down to us today. Today we have this attitude of chronological snobbery which believes that people in the past were stupider than us. That they were more gullible, and that they were credulous and naturally explained things they did not understand by means of appeals to gods, demons or the supernatural. There are other attitudes as well. There is a basic materialist worldview that assumes that there is no God and so no God is featured in any attempt to explain anything, a natural explanation as is the proper mode for science to work on is expected and when not found, one would rather wait for more information to reveal a natural explanation than resort to a supernatural one. There is much to commend in this attitude, but there is also a hidden bias which can prejudice the case.

On top of this is the basic assumption that science is the only way to know things legitimately, so if it cannot be established by scientific means then it cannot be certified as true knowledge or reliable. These attitudes have even crept into Christianity and so there are all sorts of liberalism that has an anti-supernatural bias. The most famous of which is Rudolph Bultmann who said that anyone who lives in the age of the television or the transistor radio can believe in miracles. His point was that many of the things we know today would have seemed miraculous to the 1st century person. Imagine taking a bushman into your home, and showing him your TV. You turn on the news and he sees a person talking to him. He looks behind the TV, he talks to the TV and is confused and asks you what is happening. So you tell him that the person talking to him is hundreds of kilometres away in another place. There is someone who is pointing a camera at him who is recording his news broadcast. That audio-visual signal, in colour, is conveyed through wires to an aerial which sends a signal which is received by an antenna that reassembled all the bits of data. Your TV has tech in it that interprets that signal and gives you a picture in real time, live of what is happening somewhere else. For Bultmann reality is incredible and miracles were just a name for things people didn't understand at the time.

Defence of miracles

So what do we see in response to these things? Let us take them one at a time. Firstly, the arguments that God cannot violate the laws of His own creation is a very special form of pleading. It accepts that God exists, and that God is powerful enough to create but for very weak reasons that He cannot do miracles. Also the idea that creation is a machine that is not constantly upheld by God, that the regularity of nature is somehow independent of God

and His constant working and providence is not a teaching we as Christians hold. God is in every tick and every tock sustaining it at all times by the word of His power, Heb. 1:3.

Spinoza's view of God is not biblical at all, that nature is a necessity that God has to create and any deviation would be an act of self-denial denies the act of Creation as a free act on God's part.

Hume's arguments have had its supporters and its critics, Richard Dawkins is a modern day supporter of Hume's views. In his children's book *The Magic of Reality*, he writes, 'Hume didn't come right out and say miracles are impossible. Instead he asked us to think of a miracle as an improbable event — an event whose improbability we might estimate. The estimate doesn't have to be exact. It's enough that the improbability of a suggested miracle can be roughly placed on some sort of scale, and then compared with an alternative explanation such as hallucination or a lie.'¹ However, we must point out that Hume's scales are weighted, miracles are by definition not as regular as natural occurrences and so will always be at a disadvantage. Hume himself admitted that even fantastic things like someone who was dead coming back from the grave would be better doubted than believed by his thinking. This is a clear case of a logical fallacy we call begging the question. Miracles don't happen because we have already rigged it so that they are disqualified as miracles because they are outnumbered by natural occurrences.

Greg Bahnsen talks about how a bias against miracles reveals the illogical nature of the argument of the unbeliever not the believer who holds to miracles, 'Unbelievers who speak this way are usually quite unaware of the fatuous and fallacious character of what they are saying and suggesting. They often think that they are treating the miracle-claims of the Bible as independent evidence that the Christian worldview is rationally unacceptable. Their reasoning is something like this: we already know miracles do not occur ("How could anybody believe..."), and since Christianity claims that such impossible things did occur (e.g., virgin birth, resurrection), we can draw the conclusion that Christianity must be false. But that conclusion is not so much "drawn" as it is taken for granted from the very outset. The denial of the very possibility of miracles is not a piece of evidence for rejecting the Christian worldview, but simply a specific manifestation of that very rejection.'²

We must say a word about people in the past being more gullible than us. C. S. Lewis in his excellent book on Miracles writes, 'The idea that the progress of science has somehow altered this question is closely bound up with the idea that people 'in olden times' believed in them 'because they didn't know the laws of Nature'. Thus you will hear people say, 'The early Christians believed that Christ was the son of a virgin, but we know that this is a scientific impossibility'. Such people seem to have an idea that belief in miracles arose at a period when men were so ignorant of the course of nature that they did not perceive a miracle to be contrary to it. A moment's thought shows this to be nonsense: and the story of the Virgin Birth is a particularly striking example. When St. Joseph discovered that his fiancée was going to have a baby, he not unnaturally decided to repudiate her. Why? Because he knew just as well as any modern gynaecologist that in the ordinary course of nature women do not have babies unless they have lain with men.'

There are other biblical characters who show that they are not gullible but sceptical. Think of Thomas in the upper room, John 20:24-29, 'Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the

1 https://evolutionnews.org/2011/12/the_magic_of_re/

2 <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pa165.htm>

Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Mary and the disciples on the Emmaus road were not expecting a resurrection, in fact the sadness and despair of the disciples pointed to the fact that they were not expecting it. And when Paul preached in Athens that Jesus resurrected from the dead, we do not see that all gullibly and readily accepted the story on hearsay, some mocked, Acts 17:32, "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."

We must also address the fallacy that science is the only way to know things legitimately. This is called scientism, and the great problem with it is that there is no scientific evidence to verify that science is the only way to know things truly. In other words it cannot fulfil its own requirements, it cannot prove that science is the only way to know things. We can well demonstrate that things like aesthetics, morality, philosophy and many other things are not established by the process that scientists use to investigate nature. Now we want to say that science is a gift of God, that is a form of knowing things well. However, there are a few qualification we must add. Firstly, science is not the sole source of true knowledge. This is an unworkable position. Most of our communication and belief about things is not on the basis of absolute certainty derived from personal observation. Secondly, science is not infallible, like any discipline it is built on assumptions, and when those assumptions over reach like in the case of disqualifying miracles it has overstepped its bounds. Science is limited in knowing the past because it cannot observe it, it can speculate and hypothesize but cannot categorically state things as fact. Likewise with the future. Science cannot give moral verdicts, or aesthetic judgements, it cannot explain why we are here only give facts about what is. Science is a great tool for us to use in God's world and a part of His common grace gifts to us.

We must end by saying something about the resurrection. Hume insists the a true miracle must be verified by people who are educated to know better and who would have something to lose by lying. Well the disciples faced martyrdom for the truth of the resurrection of Christ. This was a miracle that was done when the disciples were not expecting it, it was first revealed to a woman, the original doubts of his close followers are recorded as well as their ensuing faith, they were monotheists who worshipped as God the one who resurrected, they gave public testimony to the fact that He was resurrected and were even willing to suffer and die because His resurrection gave them hope. This resurrection was seen by over 500 people at the time. We have four gospel accounts all testifying to it giving us the best attested event in the ancient world.

Miracles are possible, not because the potential for them is within nature, but because God is all powerful. We admit to false miracles that deceive, we admit to many believing things to be miracles that are not, we admit that science has helped us put many superstitions away, but this does not explain away God as creator and Saviour. We seek to demonstrate through this conversation about miracles the bias and prejudice that so often drives the modern unbeliever to disbelief. We pray that this discussion will show you the irrational

nature of your unbelief and you will be convicted to see there is a God who are denying and a Saviour you need to trust for the forgiveness of your sins.