

Session 3: Questions about Miracles and Jesus

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Recommended text: Doug Powell, *Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*, 2006.

Introduction

A. Last session: Pointers to God.

1. Ontology: The existence of the universe
2. Teleology: The amazing order in the universe
3. Biology: The origin of life in the universe
4. Anthropology: The capacities of humans

B. Other pointers to God: Miracles and Jesus

1. God and miracles:
 - a. Where do we begin?
 - b. A creator God helps confirm miracles; and miracles help confirm God.
2. "We want a sign!" (Note Mt 12:38-39; cf. Lk 11:29-32; Mt 16:1-4)
3. Focus on *biblical* miracles.

C. Questions for consideration:

1. Why are miracles so important?
2. What *are* miracles?
3. Doesn't science disprove miracles?
4. Are miracles all the same?
5. Is it ever rational to believe in biblical miracles?
6. What about Jesus' resurrection? Why should anyone believe that?

D. What ARE miracles? (Table discussion)

1. List some characteristics of a miracle: "It's a miracle if: _____."
2. Do miracles necessarily violate the laws of nature?

I. Biblical Claims about Miracles.

A. Old Testament examples

1. The flood (Gen 6-9).
2. The plagues in Egypt (Ex 10:1-2 "... Go tell Pharaoh ... that I may perform these signs of Mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians, and how I performed My signs among them; that you may know that I am the Lord.")
3. Compare Egyptian sorcerers (Ex 7:8-12 Aaron's rod).
4. Parting the Sea (Ex 14:13-31).
5. Elijah vs. the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18).

B. Examples of Jesus' works (about 37 miracle events):

1. **On persons** (Mt 9:35-36)
 - a. 10 lepers (Lk 17:11-19).
 - b. Paralytic at Capernaum (Mt 9:1-8; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26) and at Bethesda pool in Jerusalem (Jn 5:1-9).

¹ The class webpage provides access to handouts (with blanks filled-in), a "Question/Answer" section, and links to helpful resources, including books and Internet resources. Please feel free to submit questions.

- c. Blind man at Pool of Siloam (Jn 9:1-12).
- 2. **On nature**
 - a. Water into wine (Jn 2:1-11).
 - b. Calming the storm (Mt 8:23-27; Mk 4:35-41; Lk 8:22-25).
 - c. Feeding 5,000 (Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:31-34; Lk 9:10-17) and 4,000 (Mt 15:32-39; Mk 8:1-9).
 - d. Cursing the fig tree (Mt 21:18-22; Mk 11:12-14).
 - e. Raising the dead: Daughter of Jairus (Mt 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk 8:40-56) and Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44).

C. The centrality of the resurrection of Jesus

- 1. Acts 2:22-24 "... Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst ... you nailed to a cross ... But God raised Him up again" [Preached in Jerusalem 50 days after Jesus' death and resurrection.]
- 2. 1 Cor 15:1-20 ³Christ died ... was buried and ... was raised on the third day according to the scriptures ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. ¹⁵Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁷and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

D. Fulfilled prophecy.

- 1. Deut 18:18-22 "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken" (22).
- 2. Lk 24:25-27 [Resurrected Jesus on the way to Emmaus]: "And He said to them, 'O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?' Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures."
- 3. Acts 17:2-3 "And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'"
- 4. Acts 26:22-23 "So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."
- 5. **Some specific prophecies regarding Jesus:**
 - a. To be born of a virgin (Is 7:14).
 - b. To be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).
 - c. To be heralded by a forerunner [John the Baptist] (Is 40:3; Mal 3:1; cf. Matt 11:7-15).
 - d. The messiah will heal the blind, deaf, and lame (Is 35:5-6; cf. Matt 11:2-6).
 - e. Jerusalem's king will come on a donkey (Zach 9:9; cf. Matt 21:1-11).
 - f. Prophesied descriptions of the crucifixion of Jesus (Is 53; cf. Matt 27:11-14, 27-31, 33-37): "He was pierced for our transgressions"; "like a lamb that is led to slaughter ... He did not open His mouth"; "He had done no violence nor was there any deceit in His mouth."
 - g. Description of the crucifixion and words spoken (Ps 22:1-8; cf. Matt 27:45-46; Mk 15:33-34): e.g. "Why have You forsaken Me?"
 - h. Jesus' body will not decay (Ps 16:10; Acts 2:24-32).
 - i. Jesus [as Lord] will sit at the right hand of God—an allusion to the ascension (Ps 110:1; cf. Acts 2:33-36).

E. The purpose of miracles

- 1. To _____ the Lordship of the only true God (Ex 8:10; 8:22; 9:14; 10:2 "... how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am the Lord").
- 2. To _____ repentance for the Kingdom of God (e.g. Tyre/Sidon Mt 11:20-24)

Matt 11: ²⁰Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. ²¹“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes....” ²³And you, Capernaum, ... if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.

3. To _____ Jesus as Messiah/Christ—the anointed One—as the Son of God.
a. John 10:22-39

John 10: ²⁴The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.” ²⁵Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these testify of Me... [Jews picked up stones to stone him]

³⁷If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”

- b. John 20:30-31

³⁰Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

4. To _____ the apostles and preachers in the early church (Acts 2:43; 4:29-31; 5:12; 6:8 [Stephen]; 8:6 [Phillip]; 14:3 [Paul and Barnabas]; 2 Cor 12:11-13 “the signs of a true apostle were performed”).

II. What ARE Miracles?

A. Challenges in defining a “miracle”

1. “An event *caused by God* that”
2. “An event ... that *violates natural law*.”

B. Biblical examples to consider.

1. The plague of locusts (Ex 10:12-15).
2. The catch of fish (Lk 5:1-11).
3. Coin in fish’s mouth (Matt 17:24-27).
4. Raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mt 9:18-26) and Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44).

C. Hints at “levels” of miracles.

1. Staff>serpent; hand>>leprous; Nile>>blood.
 - a. [Ex 4: ⁸“If they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign. ⁹But if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”
2. The plagues.

D. Types of miracles

1. _____ miracles (cf. initial and any specific divine actions to bring things into existence).
2. _____ miracles (cf. “fine-tuning” in the cosmos, galaxy, solar system, earth conditions and provisions).
3. _____ (providence?) miracles.
4. _____ miracles.
5. _____ miracles.

E. **Working definition of miracle:** An event (or condition) whose nature and timing bear witness to God’s influence in the universe that would not occur by the mere capabilities of humanity or the expected regularities of nature.

III. Objections by Skeptics/Atheists (e.g. David Hume, 1711-1776)

- A. Miracles CANNOT occur: they violate natural law, which is not possible.
- B. It is never *rational to believe* in miracles.
 - 1. Natural law is established by enormous numbers of observations.
 - 2. Miracles, by definition, are VERY unusual.
 - 3. Rational belief must be apportioned to the evidence (“It is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence”—W.K. Clifford)
 - 4. Therefore, it can never be rational to believe in miracles.
- C. Objections by “liberal” thinkers
 - 1. God may act, but not in a detectable way in nature or history.
 - 2. Such miracles are not essential to God’s message. They are metaphorical narratives of morality and God’s power to renew.
- D. Some apologetic responses:
 - 1. “Natural Law” cannot be established *with certainty* by accumulating observations; such certainty requires observations of every instance (including future ones), which is impossible.
 - 2. It is not legitimate merely to “weigh” evidence quantitatively.
 - 3. Hume’s concept of miracle excludes miracles *by definition*.

“Now of course we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely ‘uniform experience’ against miracles, if in other words they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately, we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we can know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle” (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 105; cited by Geisler in Geivett and Habermas, *Defense of Miracles*, p. 78).

- 4. Hume’s ideas mean that one would *never* be rational in believing *any extraordinary event*, even one that we personally, directly, and undeniably experience ourselves.

“In fact, Hume’s argument seems to prove too much. It proves that we should not believe in a miracle even if it happens!” (Geisler, “Miracles and the Modern Mind,” in *In Defense of Miracles*, p. 79)

IV. Mistaken Mindsets about Miracles

- A. “Miracles are miracles. Everybody knows what they are.”
- B. “Miracles always violate the ‘laws of nature.’”
- C. “Science proves that miracles cannot happen.”
 - 1. Science is only *descriptive*, not prescriptive.
 - 2. Science is limited, in spite of great progress.
 - a. Discoveries continue to revise (and sometimes contradict) former ideas.
 - b. The quantum (sub-atomic) world does not operate like a precise, predictable machine.
 - c. Multiple dimensions could explain our current limited knowledge.
- D. “Miracles deny the principle of causation, so they are unacceptable for anyone living in a scientific age.”
- E. “Only God can perform miracles.”
 - 1. Mt 24:24 “For false Christ’s and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.”
 - 2. 2 Thess 2:8-10 “⁸ Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; ⁹ *that is*, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, ¹⁰ and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.”

V. The Resurrection of Jesus: A Case Study

A. Historical data that must be explained.

1. Jesus died of crucifixion.
2. Jesus' apostles cowered in fear before the purported resurrection.
3. Jesus' tomb was secured by Jewish and Roman authorities (Mt 27:57-66).
 - a. A "new tomb" (Mt 27:60; Lk 23:53) that was nearby the crucifixion site (Jn 19:42).
 - b. Owned by a named individual, a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (a member of the Sanhedrin (Mt 27:57-60; Mk 15:42-46; Lk 23:50-53; Jn 19:38-42).
4. Jesus' tomb was empty after three days.
5. Jesus' apostles made eyewitness claims of His resurrection, boldly preached His resurrection, and tradition indicates that all but one violently died because of their message.
6. Other early believers in Jesus' resurrection did the same.
 - a. James, half brother to Jesus (Jn 7:5; Gal 1:9)

Josephus, Jewish historian (AD 37-100): "Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned;..." (*Antiquities*, Book 20, chapter 9).

- b. Stephen (Acts 7)
- c. Saul/Paul: Tradition indicates that he was beheaded in Rome.

B. Biblical testimony (samples)

1. Matt 28:1-6 (cf. Mark 16:1-6) "... The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.'"
2. Luke 24:1-9 "... and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, 'Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'" (vs. 5-7).
3. Acts 2:22-24 ²²"Men of Israel ... Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst ... ²³you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death. ²⁴But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.... ³²This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses."
4. 1 Cor 15:1-20 "Christ died ... was buried and ... was raised on the third day If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless."

C. Post-resurrection appearances (over _____, in different settings, on at least _____ occasions).

1. To Mary and Mary Magdalene (Matt 28:5-10; Mk 16:1-11; Jn 20:11-18).
2. To Peter (Lk 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5).
3. To Cleopas and friend (Lk 24:13-35; Mark 16:12-13).
4. To the apostles without Thomas (John 20:19-24; Lk 24:36-40).
5. The apostles with Thomas (Jn 20:25-29; 1 Cor 15:5).
6. The Lake of Tiberias appearance (Jn 21).
7. The appearance to the 500 (1 Cor 15:6).
8. The appearance to James (1 Cor 15:7). Note James's radical conversion (Mk 3:21,31-32; Jn 7:1-5; Acts 15:13-ff; Gal 1:19; 2:9).
9. To the eleven in Galilee (Matt 28:16-20).
10. To Saul (Acts 9:1-9; 22:1-11; 26:9-19; 1 Cor 15:8).

D. Prior to the event, **Jesus' disciples** did not expect Jesus' resurrection; nor did they specifically understand the (Hebrew) scriptures to predict His resurrection.

1. Biblical considerations
 - a. Luke 24:25-27 “²⁵ And He said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”
 - b. Jn 2:18-22 “¹⁸ The Jews then said to Him, “What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²² So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.”
 - c. Jn 20:8-9 “⁸ So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.”
2. The **“apologetic irony”**: One might think that it would be apologetically valuable for the disciples to understand such OT predictions before the resurrection event. But this would make it much more likely that that the disciples would simply “contrive” the resurrection based on their convictions about these predictions.
3. Jewish beliefs in the first century.
 - a. Pharisees accepted a resurrection, but the Sadducees did not (Mk 12:18-27).
 - b. Those who accepted a resurrection only thought of a resurrection at the _____ of the world, NOT one in the middle of history (see Jn 11:24).
 - c. A _____ resurrection of people was accepted, NOT the resurrection of an isolated _____.

E. Classic criticisms of the resurrection of Jesus

1. Jesus was not really dead.
2. The disciples went to the wrong tomb.
3. The resurrection appearances were wish-fulfillment hallucinations.
4. The early church retroactively fabricated the resurrection narratives.
5. The resurrection of Jesus merely mimicked resurrections in the ancient mystery religions (e.g. Isis and Osiris).

Robert Price (atheistic and Christian skeptic): “... [L]ike Osiris, Jesus was originally described as being anointed with the ointment of resurrection. Jesus Christ denoted originally ‘Jesus the Risen One.’ The background and imagery are those of the Mystery Religions” (Robert Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*, [2003], 286).

- a. **BUT, chronological problems:** mystery religion parallels date to late-2nd century AD at the earliest. Did mystery religions influence earliest Christianity, or vice versa?

“One cannot deny that post-Constantinian Christianity [fourth and fifth centuries AD], both Eastern and Western, adopted not a few pagan rites and practices” (Bruce Metzger, “Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity,” in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian*, 1968, p. 4; cited in Foreman, see below, p. 174).

“What is missing, though, is evidence to suggest that any pagan religion influenced basic Christian teaching or the gospel accounts of Jesus written in the first century” (Mark Foreman, “Challenging the Zeitgeist Movie,” in *Come Let Us Reason*, ed. Copan and Craig, 175).

- b. **BUT, major factual problems:** mystery religions do not have a genuine “resurrections”; the term is applied to e.g. Osiris going on to the Netherworld or twitching his finger.
- c. **BUT, such “parallels” do not have a genuine bodily resurrection** in space and time that was accessible to multiple, living humans in a variety of circumstances and conditions.