

## Miracles

In our study of the doctrine of creation we have been looking at God's governance of the world. We first examined what is classically called God's *providentia ordinaria* – or God's ordinary providence – which is the way in which he typically governs the world, and I defended a Molinist model of divine providence. But there's another aspect of the doctrine of divine providence which is classically known as *providentia extraordinaria* – or God's extraordinary providence. Typically God's extraordinary providence is understood as miracles – his special supernatural acts in the world. But I like to distinguish within extraordinary providence between what I call a special providence and a miracle.

### Special Providence

On a Molinist view, God can, via his middle knowledge, arrange for extraordinary events to occur which would otherwise be highly improbable coincidences by knowing what free agents would do in any circumstance he might put them in. For example, when the nation of Israel comes to cross the Jordan River, just as they come to the Jordan suppose that a landslide occurs upstream blocking the river, so that they're able to cross through on the dry riverbed. This would not be a miraculous action of God. He didn't push back the waters in a miraculous way. It was purely natural. But the timing of that landslide – just as they are ready to cross the river – suggests that this is a special providence. A special providence would be an extraordinary event that comes about because of God's governance of the world, but it doesn't involve any supernatural intervention on God's part. Rather, a special providence has entirely natural causes, whereas a miraculous event

would involve the intervention of God in the sequence of secondary effects in the world.

I think it's very helpful to distinguish between a special providence and a miracle. This can be of importance practically because in many cases we don't have the faith to pray for a miracle to happen. We want to pray for a situation, but it's hard to believe that God's going to do a miracle in this situation. So, for example, you want to apply for a job and you're praying that God would provide work for you. It's hard to believe that God is going to miraculously cause neural firings in the brain of some interviewer to make him hire you. But what God could do is have a special providence whereby he arranges for a person to be in those circumstances who God knew would freely hire you. And that you can have the faith to pray for! Similarly, in cases of illness, while we may not have the faith to pray for a miraculous healing, we can pray for a special providence whereby God will use natural medical means to heal us. So I think that this doctrine of special providence has real practical implications for our prayer life. Many times it's difficult to pray for a genuine miracle as a supernatural intervention of God in the series of secondary causes. But we could pray that God would specially and providentially arrange for something to happen in answer to a prayer.

## V. Miracles

Let's now go on to look at miracles. First let's look at the scriptural data concerning miracles.

### A. Biblical Data

Clearly the Bible is a book of miracles. Over and over again in both the Old and the New Testaments you have stories of God's

miraculous acts in history. For example, in the Old Testament these miracles tend to center around the Exodus when God brings his people out of bondage in Egypt and delivers them. And then miracles also cluster around the two prophets Elijah and Elisha. These tend to be the two foci, as it were, of Old Testament miracles – the Exodus and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha.

In the story of the Exodus, the ten plagues that God sends upon Egypt and the deliverance of the people from Pharaoh's army are clearly miraculous acts, not just natural events. The story of Elijah's battle with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 is a classic example of God's using miraculous acts to authenticate the truth of his prophet's message. In the story of the contest with the prophets of Baal, Elijah challenges them to do a miraculous act, and they are unable to perform that act. Then Elijah calls upon the Lord to reveal himself, and in a miraculous act fire falls from heaven and consumes the sacrifice which Elijah has laid upon the altar before the Lord. When God does this, the response of the people is, *The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God!* God has vindicated himself and shown the existence of Yahweh as the true God through this miraculous intervention.

In the New Testament you have a sequence of extraordinary miracles associated with Jesus of Nazareth. God's self-revelation in his Son, Jesus Christ, is attended with miraculous acts on Jesus' part which are signs to the people of the in-breaking of God's kingdom in Jesus' ministry. The culminating miracle of the New Testament is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead whereby God vindicates his Son and shows that the condemnation of him by the Sanhedrin was wrong, that Jesus was in fact who he claimed to be.

Sometimes I have heard it said that people in the ancient world did not distinguish between natural and supernatural events – this is a distinction only drawn by modern people, but in the ancient world there was no such distinction between natural and supernatural events. I think that this claim is shown to be clearly false not only by the story of Elijah and his contest with the prophets of Baal whereby God by a miraculous act demonstrated that he was the true deity, but also by the story of Jesus' healing of the blind man in John 9. In this story, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. The Jewish authorities repeatedly interrogate this man and his parents to see if Jesus really in fact had healed a man who was blind from birth. In John 9:30-33 we read,

The man answered, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Here I think you see a perfect illustration of how miracles served to warrant the proclamation of Jesus and his being a special revelation from God. So clearly people in the ancient world were able to distinguish between the normal events that happen in the ordinary course of nature and some miraculous act of God like healing a man blind since birth.

So in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament, we find stories of God's miraculous acts in human history.

## B. Systematic Summary

Let's turn now to a systematic summary of this material. We want to talk first about the 19th century collapse of the belief in miracles. I want to say a word about what led to the collapse of belief in miracles in the modern age.

### 1. 19<sup>th</sup> century collapse of belief in miracles

In his book *On the Truth of the Christian Religion* (or *Wahrheit der christlichen Religion*), the Göttingen theologian Gottfried Less argued that there are two steps in establishing that a miracle has occurred. The first step is to show that the event did occur – that some event actually took place in history. Then the second step would be to show the miraculous character of that event – that it cannot be plausibly given a natural explanation. Less wrote his book in 1758, but during the ensuing century (the 19th century) the belief in both of the steps laid out by Gottfried Less came to be regarded with skepticism, and that led in turn to a general collapse in German theology of the belief of the reliability of the Gospel stories of miracles.

The first step to be abandoned was actually the second step, that is to say the miraculous character of the events. German rationalists during the late 18th and early 19th century were willing, indeed, sometimes actually eager, to affirm the historicity of the events recorded in the Gospels. They agreed that these events actually took place. But they went to great lengths to explain these events naturally without any appeal to God's miraculous intervention. Given that events with supernatural causes do not occur, they felt that there just had to be some natural explanation of these events.

So, for example, the feeding of the 5,000 was explained by saying that Jesus and the disciples had a secret stash of bread which was concealed in a cave and someone inside would hand the bread out to Jesus as he would then distribute it to the crowds. In this way they were able to feed 5,000 people. Jesus' walking on the water was explained by a floating wooden platform just beneath the surface of the lake so that Jesus appeared to walk on the water.

Or take the resurrection of Jesus. By the end of the 18th century the old conspiracy hypothesis of the English and German deists (namely that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body and lied about the resurrection appearances) had fallen out of favor and was regarded as implausible. But that didn't mean that Jesus' resurrection lacked a natural explanation. Rather, German rationalists turned to the so-called apparent death theory to explain Jesus' resurrection.

According to this theory Jesus was actually taken down from the cross alive and laid comatose in the tomb, where he then either revived on his own or else there were other conspirators hiding within the tomb who could apply medical remedies to help revive Jesus and bring him back to health. Thereafter he then showed himself to the disciples. On this view Jesus' death was either incomplete or his death was hoaxed by the disciples in order to convince people that he was the Messiah.

In 1835 a work appeared which spelled the death knell of the rationalists' natural explanation hermeneutic. This is the book *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* by David Strauss. Strauss explained the life of Jesus and the miraculous elements in it as being the product of mythology. Strauss denied not only the miraculous nature of the events but he also denied that the events

even occurred. So now the first step in Gottfried Less' procedure for establishing a miracle was going by the board as well. The old rationalists had been willing to grant that the events themselves took place, but they sought to explain them naturally. Strauss, by contrast, said that the events never even occurred. Rather, the Gospel accounts of miracles are the result of the accumulation of myth, legend, and editorial activity on the part of the evangelists. With regard to the resurrection, Strauss rejected both the conspiracy theory of the deists as well as the apparent death theory of the natural explanation school of the rationalists. But he wasn't willing to accept the traditional view of the supernaturalists – that Jesus actually performed miracles and was raised from the dead. Instead, Strauss contended that the Gospel accounts are simply historically unreliable.

It is interesting to note, I think, that Strauss claimed at least to operate without any religious or dogmatic presuppositions. He thought that he was a perfectly neutral investigator of the Gospels. He ascribed his neutrality to his philosophical studies. When you read Strauss, you discover that he was indebted to David Hume (the Scottish skeptic) and Hume's critique of the identification of miracles. It becomes very apparent in reading Strauss that the man obviously did have certain philosophical assumptions which determine the outcome of his work. For example, Strauss simply presupposed that miracles are impossible. Strauss was an acknowledged pantheist, that is to say, he thought that God and the world are identical – that there is no transcendent being, there is no Creator and Designer beyond the world. Rather, the world is God. In later life he actually embraced materialism, that is to say, the material world is all there is. So of course he thought that miracles

are impossible. This is hardly assumption-free reasoning on Strauss' part. He was really proceeding on the same assumption that the rationalists had, namely that miracles are impossible. He said this is not a presupposition that requires proof – you just start with this presupposition, and you don't need to give any proof of the impossibility of miracles.

When it comes to Jesus' resurrection in particular, Strauss says that the idea that God intervened in the regular course of nature to raise Jesus from the dead is “irreconcilable with enlightened ideas about the relation of God to the world.”<sup>1</sup> If you're an enlightened person, then you'll recognize that the resurrection is simply impossible. Any supposedly historical account of miraculous events can just be dismissed out of hand on the basis of this assumption. He says, “Indeed no just notion of the true nature of history is possible without a perception of the inviolability of the chain of finite causes and of the impossibility of miracles.”<sup>2</sup> The chain of natural causes cannot be interrupted by divine activity, and therefore miracles are simply impossible.

This work – *The Life of Jesus*, by Strauss – was a turning point in the critical study of the New Testament. The importance of this work cannot be exaggerated. Albert Schweitzer, who wrote a history of the Life of Jesus movement during the 19th century, says that Strauss' book was a watershed in the history of the Life of Jesus movement. He says that prior to Strauss the main question that occupied scholars of the Life of Jesus was the problem of miracles. How do you reconcile a historical approach to the

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1 David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, ed. with an Introduction by Peter C. Hodgson (London: SCM, 1973) p. 736.

2 Ibid., 75.

Gospels with their evidently miraculous character? But he says, “With the advent of Strauss, this problem found a solution, viz., that these events have no rightful place in history, but are simply mythical elements in the sources.”<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1860s, Schweitzer says, the problem of miracles had lost all importance. In his book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer says this:

That does not mean that the problem of miracle is solved. From the historical point of view it is really impossible to solve it, since we are not able to reconstruct the process by which a series of miracle stories arose, or a series of historical occurrences were transformed into miracle stories, and these narratives must simply be left with a question mark standing against them. What has been gained is only that the exclusion of miracle from our view of history has been universally recognized as a principle of criticism, so that miracle no longer concerns the historian either positively or negatively.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of Strauss' influence, the problem of miracles simply disappeared. For Strauss the miraculous events narrated in the Gospels never really took place. They are just unhistorical myths. The narratives of the Gospels are therefore unreliable and unhistorical in character.

So both of the steps that Gottfried Less identified in establishing the occurrence of a miracle have now vanished. You could neither

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3                    Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 3rd ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954) p. 10.

4                    *Ibid.*, 11 0-11.

show that the events occurred nor could you show that if they occurred they were miraculous.

I would be remiss at this point if I would just leave it at that and not also mention that Strauss' mythological approach to the Gospel remained the dominant viewpoint in New Testament scholarship right up until the mid 20th century. But now there has occurred what New Testament scholar Craig Evans has called "the eclipse of mythology" in New Testament studies. Evans explains that over the last 50 or 60 years New Testament scholars have come to understand that in fact mythology is just the wrong category for interpreting the historical Jesus. This has led to an abandonment of Strauss' mythological approach to the Gospels. Mythology is no longer thought to be a relevant category for interpreting Jesus and the Gospels. The mainstream of New Testament scholarship, and Life of Jesus scholarship in particular, recognizes that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact a healer and an exorcist. That's not to say that the majority of scholars agree that he performed genuine miracles. The miraculous character of the events would still need to be established, but the first step that Less argued needed to be established has been reclaimed, I think, against Strauss. It is widely recognized today that Jesus of Nazareth did carry out a ministry of miracle-healings, however you might want to go on to explain these. Jesus was an exorcist who cast demons out of people, however you might want to explain these sorts of events. I think we can be thankful that we have seen in some measure a significant reversal of the 19th century collapse of the belief in miracles in New Testament criticism. The events themselves at least are back on the table once again as a result of the eclipse of

mythology in 20th century New Testament studies of the life of Jesus.