

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation
Lecture 15
The Definition of “Miracle”

We saw last time that the 19th century collapse of the belief in miracles among biblical scholars had its roots in the 18th century and even earlier. Today we want to begin some assessment of those reasons and arguments that led to skepticism concerning the occurrence and identification of miracles.

First, the Newtonian world-machine. You'll remember that, according to these Newtonian thinkers, a miracle could only be regarded as a *violation* of the laws of nature, but God had established these immutable laws of nature and so if a miracle occurred it would have to be a violation of those laws which they held to be impossible.

Many contemporary defenders of miracles have said that the advent of modern physics subverts this picture of the Newtonian world-machine. We no longer live in the sort of deterministic universe that was described by Newtonian physics. Indeed, in quantum physics, there is an element of indeterminacy in nature, that is to say there is an indeterminacy that is inherent and ineliminable from nature. We cannot, for example, know the exact position and momentum of any particle in the universe. Therefore, contrary to Laplace's boast, it is in principle impossible to predict the exact state of the universe at any time in the past or future based upon a knowledge of nature's laws and the knowledge of the present condition of the universe. The universe has this inherent indeterminacy built into it.

Some have suggested that because the picture of a deterministic world is now gone from contemporary physics that this allows room for miracles on God's part. I would agree that psychologically the demise of the deterministic picture of the universe might dispose folks to be more open emotionally to miracles. But really, if you think about it, any event that would be miraculous in Newtonian physics (say, the feeding of the five thousand) would be so extraordinarily improbable even in quantum physics that it would have to be regarded as miraculous if it actually occurred. In other words, quantum physics could open the door a tiny crack for allowing these anomalous events to occur, but they would still be so highly improbable that it really would not allow much scope for the plausibility of identifying some event as a miracle. In fact, attributing miracles to quantum indeterminacy, if you think about it, threatens to turn miracles into freaks of nature, not acts of God. They are just the result of indeterminate quantum processes in nature, and that surely is not what we mean by a miracle. So while it may be true that we no longer live in a universe that is governed by deterministic laws, I don't think that really goes much distance toward a defense of the possibility and credibility of miracles.

Rather, I think we should challenge the idea that miracles are, properly speaking, violations of the laws of nature. This is an extremely prejudicial description of a miracle, when you think about it. It connotes the idea of God's breaking a criminal law or, even worse, God's violating Mother Nature. It makes God look like he is involved in some sort of criminal activity. So psychologically the idea of God's violating the laws of nature is one that I think we would be well rid of.

When you examine what the laws of nature are, I think it becomes quite clear that miracles, properly speaking, are not violations of nature's laws. Why? Because nature's laws are statements of what will happen under certain ideal conditions. The laws of nature are idealizations of what will happen under certain given conditions. But very often, those conditions don't obtain. For example, I am told that potassium and chloride will naturally combust when combined. That would be a consequence of a law of nature that when potassium and chloride are combined they produce combustion. But we have both of these elements in our body, and yet our bodies don't combust! Why not? Because there are other natural factors interfering with the combustion of these two elements, so they can safely co-exist in our body. Thus, what the laws of nature describe are what would happen under certain highly idealized conditions. But, if there are other natural factors interfering, then the predicted event won't occur.

In other words, the laws of nature have implicit *ceteris paribus* conditions in them. In addition to big words, Latin words are also helpful for impressing your friends and neighbors! *Ceteris paribus* means everything else being equal (all else being equal), the laws of nature describe what will happen under those conditions. So the laws of nature describe what will happen all things being equal (*ceteris paribus*) under these idealized conditions. But if some natural agent or factor is interfering, then all things are not equal – the idealized conditions don't obtain, and therefore the predicted event will not occur. In such a case, the law is not violated – the event doesn't break the law – rather the law just doesn't apply because the *ceteris paribus* conditions don't obtain.

Now apply this to a miracle. In the case of a miracle, obviously if a supernatural agent is interfering or involved then once again the law won't apply. So these *ceteris paribus* conditions must not only include statements about natural agents not interfering but also that there is no interference on the part of any supernatural agent that there might be as well. So the laws of nature are idealization that describe what will happen under certain conditions if no natural or supernatural factors are interfering with the idealized conditions implicit in the law. So when a miracle occurs, it doesn't violate the laws of nature because the laws of nature describe what will happen if there is no supernatural agent interfering with the conditions. Therefore, miracles should not be considered to be violations of nature's laws.

START DISCUSSION

Student: In Genesis we are told that God created the universe. He looked at everything he had made and said it's good. The natural laws that you're talking about – are they his laws that were in effect then or after the Fall?

Dr. Craig: I don't see any reason to think that the natural laws that describe the universe today were not also the laws of nature established by God at the very beginning. When you read the punishments and the curses that are the result of the Fall in Genesis 3, they include things like increased pain in childbearing for the woman, thorns and thistles in the ground, more difficulty in agriculture and farming, and for the serpent crawling on his belly the rest of his life. There's no reason to think that the fundamental laws of nature have been affected by human sin.

Student: I would call miracles a superseding of laws with the supernatural activity. But the laws always stay. But pursuant to what you are saying, we have an example of this in [Hurricane] Florence. Normally buses don't float, but if you have a hurricane they float. These are examples of that. But like when Jesus raised Lazarus, people didn't stop dying everywhere in Judea and in the world in that particular instance.

Dr. Craig: I like the way you described it. It's not that the law of nature has been violated but that it's been superseded. That seems to me to be an acceptable way to think about it though I'm going to offer a somewhat different characterization of miracles in a minute. But the idea there would be that the law doesn't apply in this case because of the supernatural agent's activity.

Student: Would it be that the law doesn't not necessarily apply, you have different conditions therefore a different law. Maybe a law that we're not aware of.

Dr. Craig: I don't think that would be right because that would require a specificity of the laws of nature that would be utterly impossible. You would have to have a new law of nature for every single set of conditions. Instead I think the laws are generalizations that describe what will or would take place under these idealized conditions. It would just be impossible to specify new laws under every specific set of conditions.

Student: Do critics of the idea of miracles being supernatural – are they monists? Do they believe in our physical form and a spiritual form?

Dr. Craig: OK, you used a word there that hasn't been defined. Monists – I take it by that you're talking about people who think that we are simply electrochemical machines not composed of soul and body. Monism comes from the word *mono* which means “one” as in “monotheism” – one God. A monist would be someone who would be opposed to a dualist who thinks of human beings as composed of, for example, soul and body. The

question was whether or not the denial of miracles would be championed primarily by monists. I think that that's probably likely the case because if you admit dualism (if you think that there is a soul distinct from the body that is able to affect the body), then in a sense that is a miracle, isn't it? It is something that lies outside the descriptive laws of nature which describe only the material world (the physical world). If you are a dualist, you would tend to be committed to (in a sense) miracles even though of a non-divine sort. Every time you make a free choice of the will a miracle occurs. I think that it would be true to say that those who deny miracles would tend to be monists. I just hesitate in the sense that there are a lot of theologians who are in the train of deism and who believe that God exists and believe that he is an immaterial reality but who don't want God to be active in the world in any special sort of activity. These thinkers would tend to say that God does not and cannot violate the laws of nature but they wouldn't be monists because they would believe in God as an immaterial entity. The new wrinkle among people of this ilk tends to be that the quantum indeterminacy in nature allows a little crack where God can insert himself into the world in such a way as to act in the world and affect the world without violating the predictions of the laws of nature because these laws are not deterministic. They will also sometimes exploit that as a way in which perhaps an immaterial self could act in the world without violating the laws of nature. So they still are using this violation of the laws of nature definition, I think, but would try to exploit indeterminacy to allow scope for God's activity in the world or perhaps human free decisions. But for the most part I think that you're right – it will be monists and materialists who would hold that miracles are impossible.

Student: I was reading an article about chaos theory. The author who wrote it was talking about how chaos theory can often be a misnomer, and that people misunderstand it as that everything is always random and unpredictable. I think the example he gave was the formation of quartz and how even within chaotic structures that patterns often arise. How exactly would that still be able to separate enough from determinism with quantum physics?

Dr. Craig: That's a really good question. Chaos theory is not indeterminate in the way that quantum theory is. Chaos theory simply says that certain macroscopic systems are so susceptible to the tiniest perturbations that it makes it in principle impossible to predict exactly the outcome. The flow of the tap water from your faucet into the sink is an example of a chaotic entity that cannot be precisely predicted. But that doesn't mean that it's indeterminate. It's just too complex for us to be able to manage. Similarly with insect populations, the weather, and so forth. That is different than quantum physics where many people think that the indeterminacy is not just in your mind (that it's not simply a matter of complexity), they think that the world is indeterminate – that there really is no exact position and momentum of a particle and that this is an inherent unresolvability, so

to speak, of the way nature is. Now, that's one interpretation but you can see it's different than the kind of unpredictability in chaos theory. So it would only be quantum theory that would allow some crack in the door for divine activity, not chaos theory since that's still fully determinate.

Student: I've gotten confused. I need a definition. Is a miracle where the supernatural influences apply and not the natural?

Dr. Craig: Yes.

Student: The natural law sounds like probability theory or something – that it's a very low probability. You're saying a miracle is where it's not a violation of natural laws but it's supernatural influences that apply. Is that correct?

Dr. Craig: Yes, that is correct, and that forms a nice segue to the next section. I haven't defined what I mean by a miracle yet. I've just suggested that we shouldn't think of them as violations of the laws of nature because the laws of nature describe only what will happen under certain idealized conditions.

END DISCUSSION

What is a miracle then on this understanding? A miracle, I would say, is an event which lies outside the causal powers of nature at the particular time and place of its occurrence. At a particular time and place, the natural causes that are operative at that time and place don't have the productive capacity to produce that event. So if that event occurs, then that event must be ascribed to a supernatural agency – it would be a miracle. To put it very simply, a miracle is a naturally impossible event. It's an event which the natural causes at any time and place would not have the capacity to produce.

That implies that miracles are relative to the time and place. For example, rain is not in and of itself miraculous. Relative to the causal factors at a certain time and place rain is to be expected. But on another occasion where the weather conditions are not adequate to produce rain then if someone like Elijah prays for rain and all of a sudden it begins to rain, then that would be a miraculous event. At that time and place, the natural causes that are present are not adequate – they don't have the capacity – to produce rain. So if rain occurs, it would be a miraculous event caused by a supernatural agent.

So it seems to me that miracles are not violations of nature's laws; rather, miracles are events which lie outside the productive capacity of the natural causes at a particular time and place.

START DISCUSSION

Student: So it has nothing to do with the frequency of the occurrence? For example, if a soul is a miracle and everybody has a soul – every human being – it has not got anything to do with the infrequency of it?

Dr. Craig: I think that's absolutely correct. I think that the attempt to describe miracles in terms of how rarely they occur or infrequent they are is a misunderstanding. It's a mistake. John Earman in his book on Hume's argument against miracles gives the example of proton decay. He says that scientists have invested millions and millions of dollars and thousands and thousands of man-hours for years trying to find an event of proton decay, and they have yet to do so. On a frequency model of probability, that would imply that the probability of an event of proton decay is 0 in which case it is pointless looking for it if it has zero probability to occur. We can't judge an event to be miraculous simply on the basis of its probability.

Student: And it doesn't have to be divine, as in God doing it?

Dr. Craig: No, because I think we do want to allow here that conceivably an angelic being or a demonic being could do a miracle. Remember this was one of the issues raised by Spinoza – how do you know that it's God who did the miracle? I think that we use the word “supernatural” rather than God in describing a miracle. It's something beyond the productive capacity of nature.

Student: I like your definition. I think it's good for miracles. But I do have a question. There are some examples in the Bible that they almost do seem like a violation though. I'll name a few. Let's say Lazarus where they say, *Don't remove the stone, there's going to be a stench*. You've got a body that started decomposition. There's another example – I'm trying to think of where it is right now – but the day that time stops; time does not advance.

Dr. Craig: Oh, like the long day of Joshua.

Student: Yes, that's correct. Yes, I couldn't think of where it was. But even if you look at Christ when he was on the cross. He got speared in the side, which sounds like his heart was pierced. Even with the kind of medical technology we have today, if you get stabbed in the heart you're going to die in a matter of seconds probably. I don't know if I would say it's a violation but it just seems like there are certain things that really are . . . it seems like it's beyond that.

Dr. Craig: Well, grasp the definition as I have given it. These are not violations of the laws of nature because God is interfering to raise Lazarus from the dead or prolong the day of Joshua. What these are are naturally impossible events. So you're absolutely right. It is naturally impossible for Lazarus to rise from the dead, or for some of these other things to occur. By that we mean that the causal capacity of the natural causes at that time

and place aren't sufficient for it to occur. So this is a very strong conception of miracles – that they're naturally impossible, but it just avoids this violation concept and language.

Student: If the word “violation” isn't used, could you use a word maybe more like “suspension” or something?

Dr. Craig: Yes, or like someone earlier said, “supersedes” or “suspends.” Though, see, it doesn't really “suspend” the law of nature if I've characterized them correctly because the law describes what will happen under certain idealized conditions, and that's not suspended. It is that the idealized conditions don't obtain, and so the law doesn't obtain. So maybe the law is in some sense set aside or superseded, but it's not suspended or broken.

Student: Sometimes God does this superseding in a very unnatural way. But sometimes he uses even the natural processes to do this like when you mentioned Elijah. First, he saw a little cloud and then the cloud grew and ultimately rain came from the clouds. But God initiated this. Or like the parting of the Red Sea. He used the east wind. He could have just said “part” without the wind.

Dr. Craig: Sometimes people have asked why did Jesus command the people at the wedding in Cana to fill the jars with water. Again, that would show, I think, what you just explained – sometimes God will use means. He changes the water into wine rather than just produce wine *ex nihilo* in the jars.

Student: Is it incorrect then to think of the laws of nature really bound to the world that he created? When you're supernatural you're really outside of the control or the laws that apply within the universe.

Dr. Craig: I would say that is correct.

Student: So it's not a violation; it's just an outside of that boundary?

Dr. Craig: Well, the cause is outside that boundary but the event does take place in the world. So we would wonder why is it that a man who has been dead for three days is able to get up and live again? It must be that there is something, as you say, acting from the outside in nature producing an event which nature itself just doesn't have the capacity to produce.

Student: I think of nature as bound within the creation, and these are forces outside of that. So there's no reason why they could not interfere.

Dr. Craig: Well, yes, and that forms a nice segue to my next point!

Student: Well, let me turn it back over to you.

Dr. Craig: OK! Those who've been in the class for some time know how to move the discussion along!

END DISCUSSION

If what I've said is correct then the next question should be – what could make a naturally impossible event possible? What could make a naturally impossible event happen? The answer to that question is (as we've just discerned) seems obvious – God! If God exists then miracles are possible. If there is a transcendent creator and designer of the universe who brought all matter and energy into being and who set and established the laws of nature, then such a transcendent being would obviously have the capacity to produce events within nature which lie beyond the productive capacity of nature itself. Given the existence of God, miracles, it seems to me, are obviously possible.

In order to show that miracles are impossible a person would therefore have to show that atheism is true. He would have to have some sort of argument for atheism because as long as it's even possible that God exists, then you've got to be open to the possibility that God has acted miraculously in the universe. Of course, orthodox Christians do believe in the existence of God – a transcendent creator and designer of the universe – and therefore our belief in the possibility of miracles, it seems to me, is perfectly rational.

So, in response to the Newtonian world-machine, what we have to do is to define miracles properly – not as violations of nature's laws, but rather simply as events that are beyond the productive capacity of nature or natural causes at a certain time and place. If God exists, then such events are obviously possible. The question will then become: do we have any good evidence to think that such miraculous events have actually occurred?

START DISCUSSION

Student: Much in the way that a theoretical two-dimensional being cannot comprehend movement in the third dimension . . . is that kind of the way that we can't comprehend actions that are in the supernatural kind of almost like another dimension that we can't comprehend?

Dr. Craig: I don't think that's a helpful analogy. You are suggesting that we think of two-dimensional beings inhabiting sort of flatland – a kind of Euclidean plane – and we would be three-dimensional beings that could interact with that two-dimensional world. These inhabitants of flatland would just have no conception of what a three-dimensional being would be like any more than you and I can imagine what a four-dimensional object is like. But I don't see that that's a good analogy for what we're talking about here. We're not talking about higher dimensions of reality.

Student: Just as a way of explaining how a miracle can occur, but it's not a violation of a law because it exists, like you were saying, outside of the law.

Dr. Craig: All right. Well, insofar as you're using the analogy for that purpose, yes. The inhabitants of flatland would discern events that maybe would be impossible for them but it wouldn't be impossible for an agent who exists outside of flatland to produce. In that way, similarly, God not existing within our four-dimensional spacetime world can have causal influences in that world to produce events that the causes interior to that world could not produce. That seems right. I just would resist saying that that's in any way sort of incomprehensible or unimaginable in the way that the multi-dimensional situation is. I think we have a very clear idea of what it is for God to exist and to have causal effects in the universe. There's nothing, I think, bizarre about that. It's just recognizing the reality of a transcendent being beyond the world of space and time.

Student: Were you in the service today?

Dr. Craig: I was not because returning last night from California with three hours time change I was pretty tired. And so Jan graciously allowed me to take a nap during that time.

Student: I didn't mean to put you on the spot!

Dr. Craig: That's all right! I'm not embarrassed. I mean, when you are a traveling speaker you have to catch your rest when you can.

Student: So others can concur with my question because there are many here that were in the service. Bryant Wright, if I remember correctly, said that miracles never lead people to Christ. . . . *[to another student]* Tell me what he said.

Student #2: He said it only invokes people's faith, and if people are hardened, the miracle will make them even harder.

Student: She is correct.

Dr. Craig: Certainly, in the New Testament you do see lots of examples of people who grow only harder in their resistance to God when they see miracles. You remember when the voice from heaven speaks, and some said it thundered. The Jewish authorities, when Lazarus was raised from the dead, they sought to kill him! On the other hand, though, look at the apostle Paul on the Damascus Road.

Student: Exactly. You took the words out of my mouth!

Dr. Craig: Yeah, that's a clear example of someone who came to Christ through a miraculous appearance – resurrection appearance.

Student: In the context of the Pharisees, the more miracles he did, the more they became hardened. So, yes, in that context of what he was speaking . . .

Dr. Craig: Different people will respond to miracles in different ways. It may have to do with whether the heart is prepared in some way.

Student: Right. I look at that as regeneration.

Dr. Craig: It is kind of like the four soils in Jesus' parable of the soils. But I do believe that God has prepared certain persons' hearts in such a way that, for example, when they hear the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus they are ready to believe. I've seen them give their lives to Christ in cases like that. Now, in a case like that, you don't even have the actual miracle being witnessed by the person, but he looks at the evidence – the testimonial evidence – that this miraculous action took place in Christ and is convinced, *Yes, God raised him from the dead and therefore he must have been who he claimed to be, and therefore I give my life to him as my Lord and Savior.* That happens, a lot.

Student: It's like what someone said earlier – nature, the laws, is bound to the Earth (creation) and miracles are outside of it.

Dr. Craig: The cause of the miracle.

Student: Right. Right. I think God is showing Jacob, when he converted, that the ladder is set so that the angels can come up and down. It's almost like when Jesus becomes the ladder for all the believers, that the supernatural reality set in. And so people are able to accept miracles as superseding the natural, otherwise they have a hard time to accept that.

END DISCUSSION¹

¹ Total Running Time: 38:12 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)