

# DOCTRINE OF CREATION

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## Lecture 1: Creatio Ex Nihilo

Having completed the section on the doctrine of Christ, we turn today to a new section in our class. The bulk of our time has been spent talking about the doctrine of God, quite appropriately so. After an initial section on the doctrine of revelation, we plunged into a discussion of the attributes and existence of God. We looked at the Trinity. We looked at the person of the Holy Spirit. We looked at the person and work of Christ. And today we want to shift our attention from God to the world that he has made. This is the subject of the doctrine of creation.

You'll remember when we discussed the attributes of God we saw that one of God's essential attributes is aseity; that is to say, his self-existence. We saw that God is the only uncreated being. He is the sole ultimate reality. There is nothing apart from God that is uncreated. If you could think of anything that is uncreated other than God then the correct answer to that example would be to say that is, too, created or else that does not, in fact, exist. Everything that is real that exists other than God has been created by God. This is the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* which lies at the very heart of the doctrine of creation.

The phrase in Latin – *creatio ex nihilo* – means literally “creation out of nothing.” But when theologians affirm that God has created the world out of nothing, they do not mean that he has created it out of something and that is nothing. That would be to treat nothing as though it were something. Rather, to say that God created the world out of nothing means that he created it but not out of anything. That is to say, there is no uncreated substratum out of which the world was made. Everything that exists has been created by God. In that sense creation is out of nothing; that is to say, it is not out of anything else that is uncreated [outside of] God. We want to look first in our discussion at the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and we'll begin by looking at the biblical data concerning this doctrine.

The Bible begins with the words, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). With that terse and majestic statement the author of Genesis 1 differentiated his viewpoint from all of the ancient creation myths of Israel's neighbors. The expression “the heavens and the earth” is a Hebrew idiom meaning the whole of the universe. There was no word in Hebrew for the totality of physical reality, but this idiom “the heavens and the earth” expressed the totality of physical reality. Notice that in verse 1 there is no preexistent material present. There are no warring gods and no primordial dragons as you have in pagan creation myths. Rather, there is simply God who creates the world. The word in Hebrew is *bara*, a verb which has only God as its subject. Only God can *bara* something. This is a word which does not presuppose a material substratum. It doesn't presuppose that that which is created was created out of something. So the

beginning verse in Genesis 1 states that in the beginning God created the entire totality of physical reality, the whole of the world.

At face value, therefore, this verse would seem to imply *creatio ex nihilo*. God has made everything that there is, and he didn't make it out of any sort of material substratum. It was certainly understood this way by later biblical authors as we'll see when we look at other passages from Scripture, but many modern commentators have denied this face value reading of Genesis 1:1. Usually their claim is that verse 1 should not be understood to be an independent clause or sentence; rather, it's a subordinate circumstantial clause which modifies verse 2. So they would translate it in this way: "When in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" and then the rest of the second verse would follow. Or, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void," etc. They take it to be a subordinate clause, and in this way creation really seems to begin with this chaotic state in verse 2 – the earth is without form and void, darkness upon the face of the deep, and then creation begins in verse 3: "and God said, 'Let there be light.'"

This issue has been discussed at considerable length, and it seems to me that the Old Testament commentator Claus Westermann has given a very good case for thinking that Genesis 1:1 is an independent clause rather than a subordinate clause.<sup>1</sup> Westermann makes five points as part of his case.

Number one, he says there's no evidence that the word *bereshith* (that is to say, "in the beginning") used without a definite article cannot be used to denote an absolute beginning. The Hebrew word *bereshith* means "in the beginning," and it's claimed by some that because it lacks a definite article in Hebrew it doesn't denote an absolute beginning. But Westermann says there's no evidence to think that that's true. In fact, in Isaiah 46:10 we have an example of *bereshith* used without a definite article to connote the idea of an absolute beginning. In Isaiah 46:10 the Lord says, "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things not yet done." There you seem to have the word *bereshith* used in the sense of an absolute beginning in time. Confirmation of this conclusion, says Westermann, comes from the oldest textual witnesses to this verse. For example, in the Masoretic Hebrew text, vowel points were added to the Hebrew consonants so that the original text which just had Hebrew consonants would now have vocalization through these vowel points. In the Masoretic text they indicate that this is an absolute beginning. Similarly, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint (usually abbreviated LXX) it is also indicating an absolute beginning. And finally in the New Testament, the New Testament authors, as we'll see, take Genesis 1:1 in the sense of an absolute beginning.

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1 See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

So the earliest texts that comment on or react to the Hebrew text take *bereshith* to be an absolute beginning.

The second point that Westermann makes is that the syntax of verse 1 does not prove that *bereshith* is part of a subordinate clause. One argument in taking verse 1 to be a subordinate clause would seem to be the fact that you have an identical construction in Hosea 1:2. In Hosea 1:2 you have the same syntactical construction to express a circumstantial idea. Hosea 1:2 says, “When the LORD spoke at first through Hosea,” etc. There you do have this sort of circumstantial subordinate clause expressed. But Westermann points out that you can’t understand Genesis chapter 1 in terms of Hosea which is written in an entirely different time by a different person. You’ve got to understand Genesis 1 in terms of the rest of Genesis. And what you discover is that when the author of Genesis wants to express a circumstantial idea (for example, in Genesis 5:1) he uses a different syntactical construction which is the usual form for circumstantial clauses. Genesis 5:1 says, “When God created man, he made him,” etc. That expresses a circumstantial idea – “when God did this” – and it uses a quite different sort of construction than you have in Genesis 1:1. Therefore Hosea’s syntax is the one that is out of step with Genesis. When you look at the way the author of Genesis uses his syntax, Hosea is unusual, and the normal way to express a circumstantial clause will be by a different syntactic construction.

Number three, Westermann says theological arguments alone cannot resolve the issue. People will sometimes say that the idea of creation out of nothing would have been theologically impossible for these primitive Hebrew authors to express. Westermann says that’s begging the question. You cannot just presuppose that the notion of creation out of nothing could not have been expressed by Genesis 1:1. You need to do an exegesis of the verse first in order to determine that. So you can’t avoid an exegesis of these verses in order to determine their meaning, and this exegesis needs to be carried out in the context of the book of Genesis and also in the wider context of ancient creation narratives.

The fourth point is that when you do this – when you carry out such an exegesis – then what you discover is that Genesis 1:1 is without parallel in ancient creation stories. The usual form of these ancient creation myths took the form: “When \_\_\_\_\_ was not yet” (and you can fill in the blank with something) “then God \_\_\_\_\_” (fill in the blank with what God did). “When \_\_\_\_\_ was not yet, then God did something” (and you fill in the blank). The first clause expresses the state of affairs before God’s action, and then the second clause expresses God’s subsequent activity in making something out of that state. This is the typical form that one finds, for example, in Genesis 2:5-7. There the author says, “When no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up . . . then the LORD God formed man.” You notice this follows the typical ancient formula, “When \_\_\_\_\_ was not yet, then God \_\_\_\_\_.” According to Westermann,

the author of Genesis 1 took the typical form “When \_\_\_\_\_ was not yet” and he made that verse 2 of Genesis 1. Verse 2 says, “The earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” This is the description of the state of affairs before God’s action. Then he took the second clause, “then God \_\_\_\_\_,” and he crafted that as verse 3, “then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” So in Genesis 1 verses 2 and 3 you have this sort of typical ancient formula “When \_\_\_\_\_ was not yet, then God.” But what the author of Genesis does is he prefixes then verse 1 ahead of this typical formula and verse 1 is therefore not a subordinate clause or a temporal subordinate idea. Rather, it is an independent statement, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” So Westermann says verse 1 lies completely outside the typical structure, and it is the author’s own new formulation. I quote Westermann who says,

It acquires a monumental importance which distinguishes it from other creation stories. . . . Verse one has no parallel in other creation stories while all three sentences of verse two are based on traditional material . . . the tradition history of the creation stories provides us with an answer to the question about the interrelationship of the first verses of Genesis which is certain.<sup>2</sup>

So in Westermann’s view, it is certain that verse 1 is not a subordinate clause; it is an independent clause which the author of Genesis has placed ahead of this typical formula that you find in ancient creation stories.

Finally, the fifth point is that the style of the author of Genesis 1 favors taking verse 1 as a main clause. Again I quote from Westermann, “It would be completely out of harmony with P’s style in Genesis 1 [P is the arbitrary letter that’s used to designate the source that critics use for this part of Genesis] to arrange the first three verses into one complete sentence.” For stylistic reasons, verse 1 is an independent sentence, not a subordinate clause.

The most plausible interpretation of verse 1 is that it is not a subordinate circumstantial clause but rather it’s a main clause, an independent sentence which affirms God’s creation of everything that there is.

As important as this conclusion is, it doesn’t decisively decide the question in favor of *creatio ex nihilo* for now we have to consider the relationship between verse 1 and verses 2 and 3. It might be thought that verse 1 describes God’s creation of the raw material or the stuff from which then the world is fashioned in verses 2 and following. So in the first verse you have God creating the raw material and then in verse 2 he begins to fashion a world out of this stuff. But there are two problems with that hypothesis. First of all, the

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2      Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 97.

expression “the heavens and the earth” doesn’t denote simply the stuff or the material out of which something is made. Rather, it already denotes an ordered cosmos – the heavens and the earth. This is an ordered cosmos, not just raw material. The second problem would be that creation of chaos would seem to be a contradiction in terms. When it describes the condition of the Earth in verse 2 you seem to have this chaotic state which would contradict God’s creation as a God of order.

So verse 1 then might be construed to be a sort of title for the chapter, or a kind of heading for the chapter, which summarizes everything that is in that chapter. It would be, as it were, like a subheading in a study Bible, which is not part of the text but summarizes what is going to follow. Similarly, verse 1 on this reading might be taken to be a sort of title or chapter heading for the description of the creation of the world. On that reading, again, creation would really begin in verse 3 with God saying, “Let there be light.” This might be thought not to entail *creatio ex nihilo*.

Against this understanding of verse 1 as a title or chapter heading, I think it can be rightly objected that the grammatical relationship of verse 1 to verse 2 would become an insuperable problem if you take it to be merely a title or heading. Verse 1 cannot be merely a heading for the rest of the chapter because it is connected to verse 2 by the Hebrew word “and” or *waw* in the Hebrew. This often isn’t in your English translations but it’s in the Hebrew: “In the beginning God, created the heavens and the earth, *and* the earth was without form and void.” So it’s not simply a title for the chapter; rather, there is a connection here that indicates in verse 1 God’s primary act of creation and then in verse 2 his subsequent acts of creation. This has been demonstrated more rigorously by computer-aided grammatical analysis which Old Testament scholars have carried out. This computer-aided grammatical analysis has shown that whenever you have a construction which consists of *waw* plus a non-predicate (like a subject, for example, of the sentence) plus a predicate (so like a subject and a predicate preceded by the word “and”) then what is expressed is either background or circumstantial information. If this construction precedes the main verb, as it does in verse 2, then what is given in the prior clause is background information. On this understanding, the content of verse 1 is not just a title of the chapter; rather, it is the background for what happens in verse 2: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and then the earth was without form and void and so on and so forth. So this interpretation of verse 1, I think, faces insuperable grammatical difficulties.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* A general question about Genesis 1. Some skeptics might say something like, “This was oral tradition, and then it was written down much later than when the oral

tradition was developed.” So if someone says something like that, do they use that as a way of attacking the text?

*Dr. Craig:* Not really because, as you may have noticed, Westermann himself presupposes that sort of view. He doesn’t refer to Genesis 1 as written by Moses, did he? He refers to it as from the P document or source. So he’s thinking of this as something that appeared later. In fact, the later you make it appear – the later you date it – the more plausible it is that it could have the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* in it. You can’t say this is an idea that these primitive Hebrew tribesmen couldn’t have entertained if you think that Genesis 1 dates from after the Exile. So there’s nothing in the argument here that Westermann has given that would be undermined by that sort of claim which, as you say, is very widespread among Old Testament scholars.

*Student:* Even if you take Moses, all the events that are recorded in Genesis 1 are so far in the past to when Moses lived that you would have to say this had to be perpetuated and and developed and kept in its simplicity for all that time even with other traditions of gods of suns and moons.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, and I’m going to say later on that the theology of Genesis 1 is actually very sophisticated, very highly developed, and therefore ought to make us very cautious about claims that they couldn’t possibly have expressed this idea of creation from nothing. I think that this is a chapter that is very sophisticated theologically, and they could have had the notion that God has created everything that there is – that there’s nothing apart from God that is uncreated. That is not a difficult idea to grasp.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Now I want to turn to a possible objection to the point that I’ve just made, but I think that in interest of time we will reserve that for next week.

I have argued that this is not plausibly taken to be a title or chapter heading, but that will run into some problems then with how you interpret the rest of the chapter. And we’ll take those questions up next time.<sup>3</sup>



## Lecture 2: Does Genesis 1 Teach *Creatio Ex Nihilo*?

Last time we began our study of the doctrine of creation by looking at biblical data in support of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or creation out of nothing. We began with the first verse in the Bible, Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” This verse appears to teach God’s creation of everything from nothing. But we saw that some scholars have tried to avoid that conclusion by taking verse 1 as a subordinate clause rather than as a main clause so that it reads something like this: “When, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep.” It might sound as though creation actually begins with this chaotic, dark status out of which God then fashions the world. But I suggested several reasons for thinking that, in fact, verse 1 is a main clause and not merely a subordinate clause.

This doesn’t decide the issue decisively in favor of *creatio ex nihilo*, however, because other scholars have said the opening verse, though a main clause, is a sort of title for the entire chapter. It’s like a chapter heading that summarizes everything that is in the chapter. There were two arguments for taking this as a title. Let me refresh your memory about those. The first was that the expression “the heavens and the earth” is already an ordered cosmos. It is an orderly state, and so in this title or verse 1 you already have the creation of an orderly universe described. The second argument for taking it as a title was that God could not create a chaotic state such as described in verse 2. God is a God of order and he could not create a sort of lawless, chaotic state, and therefore this must simply be the initial state with which God begins. What you have in verse 1 is a title or a heading for the whole chapter.

We saw, however, that there is a decisive argument against taking verse 1 as a title or a chapter heading, and that is that it is connected to verse 2 with the Hebrew conjunction “and” – “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth *and* the earth was without form and void.” When you have a Hebrew construction like this, the foregoing clause gives background information to the main clause. So this is not just a chapter heading. This is a description of what God did prior to what is described in verses 2 and 3.

So the question then is: how do we resolve those two arguments that we just reviewed for this being a title or a chapter heading? You’ll remember the first of these was that the expression “heavens and the earth” is already describing an orderly cosmos and therefore it cannot be prior to what happens in verses 2 and 3. This tension between verse 1 and verse 2 could be simply due to the fact that the author of Genesis took the traditional material of verses 2 and 3 (as we saw last time) and then prefixed it with verse 1 which states creation out of nothing, and that he doesn’t try to resolve the tension. He just leaves



the tension to exist there. But the theological sophistication of Genesis chapter 1 might lead us to wonder whether or not there would be some consistent interpretation of this chapter that would resolve the tension. For example, suppose we take verse 1 to be universal in its scope – “in the beginning God created the universe” – and then with verse 2 the focus dramatically narrows to the planet Earth – “and the earth was without form and void.” Then the remainder of the chapter describes how God made the earth into a habitable place for man. So the tension would be resolved by taking verse 1 to be universal and then verse 2 to be much more narrowly focused on just this planet.

Moreover, the expression in the Hebrew for “without form and void” – *tohuwabohu* – does not connote a chaos in the Greek sense of the word “chaos” – a sort of lawless, disordered state. Rather, *tohuwabohu* in the Hebrew denotes a desert waste or an uninhabitable place. In the succeeding verses in Genesis 1 what is described is God’s transforming this uninhabitable waste into a paradise suitable for human beings to live in. So what you have in verse 1 is the description of God’s creation of the entire cosmos, and then from verses 2 and following his transformation of this uninhabitable planet into a habitable ecosystem for human beings to live in.

One problem with this interpretation would be the description of the fourth day in verse 14 of Genesis where it says, “and God said ‘Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the Earth.’” This might suggest that what we have in Genesis 1 is not just the description of the transformation of the Earth into a habitable place for man but also the creation of these heavenly bodies. So that would not be consistent with the interpretation that I’ve suggested. However, this difficulty ignores a very interesting duplex, or double-stranded nature, of Genesis 1. The expression “let there be lights in the firmament” in the Hebrew – the verb *hayah* (“let there be”) plus the infinitive – means let the lights in the firmament be for the separating of days and nights. It is unlike the earlier days where God says, “Let there be” and then it specified what God creates. Rather, what you have in verse 14 is a description of what the lights in the firmament are to be for – let them be for the purpose of separating day and night and marking times and seasons and days and years and so forth. In that case it already presupposes that the lights and the heavens exist. What is happening in verse 4 is simply a specification of the purposes that they should serve. Someone might say, well, wait a minute though, in verses 16 to 18 it goes on to say,

And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

So verses 16 to 18 seem to describe God's creation of these heavenly bodies and not simply a specification of their purpose. But, as I say, this ignores this duplex nature of the creation narrative in Genesis 1. Scholars have often noted that Genesis seems to interweave or inter-braid two separate creation stories. One, creation by God's word, and then another, creation by God's actions. For example, in verses 3, 6, 9, 11, and so forth, we have creation by God's word. Verse 6, "and God said, 'Let there be a firmament.'" Verse 9, "and God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together.'" Verse 11, "and God said, 'Let the earth bring forth vegetation, etc.'" By contrast with creation by God's word, you have a second strand which is creation by his action in verses 7, 12, 16, 21, and so forth. In verse 7 it says, "and God made the firmament." In verse 12 it says, "the earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their kinds, and fruit trees bearing fruit each according to its kind." Verse 16 says, "and God made the two great lights." Verse 21, "so God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, etc." So some scholars have speculated that what the author has done here is braided together these two kinds of creation stories – one by God's word, and another by God's action.

This is possible, but the coherence and the unity of the chapter as a whole might be more satisfactorily explained if we take this duplex pattern to be a pattern of report followed by commentary by the author. It is not two separate creation narratives; rather, it's the report and then it's the author's commentary on that. So, for example, in verse 12 that we read a moment ago – "the earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their kinds, and fruit trees bearing fruit according to their kind, etc." – doesn't actually describe something that God did nor is verse 12 meant to follow temporally on verse 11 because after God says "Let the earth bring forth vegetation, plants, fruit trees, and so forth," it says, "And it was so." So this already has happened in verse 11. So what the author may be doing here is reporting God's creation by his word and then giving his comment on it. Similarly, in verse 15, after God specifies the purpose of these heavenly bodies, it says, "And it was so." Then you have verse 16 and following, suggesting that verses 16 to 18 are the author's comment on God's creation of the heavens. God is the one who made the sun and the moon and the stars. These are not deities as Israel's pagan neighbors thought. These are just things that God made. God made the stars and the moon and the sun. It doesn't necessarily imply that these things were made on the fourth day. Rather, the comment is that these are things that God has created. Indeed, this would help to understand how there could be day and night prior to the fourth day. If the sun wasn't created until the fourth day then how do you have the three prior days? It was evening, and it was morning, the first day, the second day, and the third day. But if we take the heavenly bodies to already exist prior to the fourth day then that would make sense of there already being day and night prior to verse 14.

It seems to me that if we understand this dual nature in terms of report and commentary, that would allow us to affirm that in verse 1 we have described the creation of the entire universe, and then in verse 2 and following the focus radically narrows down to the planet Earth, and what is described then is how God transforms the planet Earth into a habitable place for humankind. In that case, God's creation of the universe in verse 1 would imply *creatio ex nihilo* because it would be the beginning of all of physical reality. This is, I think, the natural interpretation of verse 1. If we're to take it in some weaker sense there would have to be powerful evidence in favor of that which I don't think there is.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* Some people say that the way it would work was that since God created light before he created the light-bearers – apparently in the Hebrew, the sun and the moon are actually the light-bearers – if he was the source of the light, then all you would need is some sort of rotation to maintain an evening and a morning even if you didn't have the sun or moon. So if you had the planet and it was rotating then if God was the source of the light before he created the light-bearers that an evening and a morning could still be created that way.

*Dr. Craig:* Where did the light come from if there was no sun at that point?

*Student:* Well, it seems like God himself, God the Father, is described as light many times. It says in Revelation there won't be any need for sun, moon, and stars because he will be the source of the light.

*Dr. Craig:* I think it is very important that we not try to impose things on the author of Genesis from outside, whether modern science or from New Testament teaching. There's nothing in Genesis 1 that suggests that God is light. On the contrary, God creates the light. He says "let there be light." Prior to that was darkness. So God is the source of this in the sense of creating it, but God himself doesn't emit photons. Right? This would make God some kind of physical reality that seems inconsistent with his creation of everything.

*Student:* Would you agree that the description in Revelation though, it does specifically say that God is the light himself, so therefore the sun, moon, and stars are no longer needed and don't exist?

*Dr. Craig:* I don't remember it says they are no longer needed or exist. Does it say that? You are right that it says he will be the light of the people in heaven. It's talking about the glorified state in heaven. That is also, I think, a word picture in Revelation. It describes things being like precious stones, polished stones, and so forth. I think we've got to be very careful about using these images in Revelation in a kind of literal way.

*Student:* When he differentiates between the sun and the stars, he creates the greater light and the lesser light, the moon, and the sun, and then he also created the stars. Materially, obviously, those are the same thing – the sun and the stars – however, because he makes a differentiation between the two, some people feel like that’s evidence that the entire universe is focused on the Earth and the Earth is in God’s mind the center of the universe, and therefore evidence that there is not intelligent life on other planets that need to be saved.

*Dr. Craig:* Wow. To me, that just goes so far beyond the horizon of the author of this narrative that, again, it’s illegitimate to impose those kinds of concerns on him. Certainly it is, can we use the word “earth-o-centric?” Yes, it is. That’s true. It’s geocentric – maybe we should say the focus is geocentric – but it’s because that’s where we are! We look out at the universe from here – from our place – and see the sun and the stars and so on. So what’s described here is how God has made the Earth a habitable, wonderful place for human beings to live on. I don’t think it says anything, or contemplates anything, about whether there might not be other places in the universe that God has made where there could be life.

*Student:* If I understand correctly, we’re talking about on day four it was just explained the purpose. So what was created on day four then? Anything?

*Dr. Craig:* No. It would seem that on day four there isn’t any thing that’s actually created. Rather, God would be specifying the functions of these heavenly bodies that already exist.

*Student:* So does that mean there’s only five days of creation?

*Dr. Craig:* No, because on the fourth day he does something – he specifies the function that these are to serve. But it would mean that there’s nothing that’s brought into existence on the fourth day on this interpretation.

*Student:* On the speaking of the two natures – the speaking and the creating. I’ve heard it said he spoke and then his already existing angels created. He spoke and the Holy Spirit created. We can look at it one way, either way. Where do you place the creation of angels? Prior to this?

*Dr. Craig:* This is, again, a question on which Genesis is silent, I think. It doesn’t tell us whether there was an angelic or spiritual creation prior to verse 1. Verse 1 describes the creation of the universe. Did he create angelic realms after this? Before it? Simultaneous with it? This is, again, a question that just doesn’t seem to be within the purview of the author. Similarly with what you suggested about ascribing the creation to angels. That just doesn’t enter the picture here at all. There’s no suggestion that God has delegated or

given over the creation of these various things to angels. I think we've got to be really careful to let the narrative speak to us on its own terms and not try to read things into it.

*Student:* Why is there a description of the process at all? I am going to use the word process because I don't want to use the word incremental because the creation was not incremental. Verse 1: "In the beginning God created the heavens in the earth." Verse 2: "The earth was formless and void." . . . I understand it is there in the text, but what's really important is that God created everything. What's the importance necessarily of saying how he went about doing that? Why is it significant to, say, break it down by days? You could compress this and say, "God created the heavens and the Earth, and then he gave order to the Earth and put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden."

*Dr. Craig:* Surely the answer to that question has got to be that early Israelites who practiced the Sabbath are looking back on this creation story as justifying having a day of rest – that God rested on the seventh day from all his works, and so similarly, we, Jews have a Sabbath day of rest during which we cease from our labor. So the seven day motif here is surely meant to reflect Jewish Sabbath observance.

*Student:* I think the purpose for this was communication. This is for us, not for God. The fact that he used his word to create (and says his word is eternal in other places) is a communicative aspect of how he did this. This is for us. This is why we observe the Sabbath. God could have just . . . he didn't need to speak it into existence. He could have just thought it into existence instantaneously.

*Dr. Craig:* I'm not so sure that addresses the question directly. I think that what I said would be more pertinent, but obviously the narrative is given to us to communicate to us what God wants us to know. These astral bodies are not gods and goddesses and that there wasn't a primordial material out of which God made the universe. He is the source of everything that exists apart from him, and these things that the pagans worship as astral deities are just lights in the sky that God has made. And God has made all the animals and so forth and given them to human beings. Then, of course, the nature of man as the lord over creation and steward of the Earth. All of these are important truths to communicate to us. You're quite right in saying that. But I think the question was asking for why there's a seven-day structure to this rather than just doing it all at once. I think that the answer to that would be that the creation week models the work week with the Sabbath day of rest at the end.

*Student:* I always have questions about the water. The next verse says the Spirit hovers over the water. It is formless and empty in the state of water. Where does water come in, and how does the Spirit hover over it?

*Dr. Craig:* I take it that what's being described here is a sort of primordial ocean that covers the land, and then God causes the dry land to emerge from the primordial ocean. It

is not, as I say, a chaos in the Greek sense. It's just an uninhabitable waste. It's this primordial dark ocean out of which the land will emerge and then vegetation and animals will be created.

*Student:* So formless and void does describe this water?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. Or the Earth. Yes, that's right. But I just don't want you to think of it in terms of a sort of Greek chaos which means a lawless state in which there's no regularity. A primordial ocean, obviously, operates according to natural laws and has regularity and so forth.

*Student:* I do think, such as Colossians 1:15-16, it says that Christ created (in other words, not angels). It says, *The son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created, things in heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible.* I think that clarifies these other stories that crop up that have no real basis in Scripture.

*Dr. Craig:* This would be the one qualification that one would want to introduce with respect to the earlier question. When you get to the New Testament materials, then quite definitely Christ is spoken of as the agent of creation. We'll look at some of those verses momentarily. But he doesn't appear anywhere in Genesis 1. This is a New Testament development.

*Student:* Can you comment on the genre of Genesis?

*Dr. Craig:* We'll talk about that more later on. This is a really difficult question. It is unique in ancient literature. Some have suggested it's poetry, but that's not right. If you compare it with the Psalms, it doesn't exhibit the kind of poetic structure that the Psalms do. It's not a hymn. But it's not just straight historical reporting either. It has a very stylized formal structure around these repeated phrases "and God said . . . and God said . . . and it was so," and so forth. So it is very difficult for scholars to determine exactly what kind of literature this is. Some have suggested that it's a creation myth in the sense of other ancient creation myths. But it definitely rejects a lot of the mythological elements of these pagan myths like the astral deities, for example, or the primordial dragons or semen or egg and so forth out of which the world was made. Here you have a much more elevated majestic account of creation. So it is not like, and doesn't borrow from, these other myths in a significant way. We'll talk more about that, but we'll just note for here that this is a really difficult question that you're raising. It will be important because that will largely determine how you interpret it.

*Student:* To me, you cannot read it as a scientific textbook on the creation.

*Dr. Craig:* Certainly not in terms of modern science. I think that's quite right. There are some Christians who will try to read back Big Bang cosmology or evolutionary theory into the narrative. I would just resist that stoutly. We need to read it from the standpoint



of an ancient Hebrew author and his audience – how they would understand it – and not try to impose modern notions on this. Before we try to read in between the lines, we need to learn to read the lines. I think you're quite right. On the other hand, I think it is an open question to what degree this might reflect ancient science, ancient conceptions of the world. Some people have said that when it describes, for example, God's creating the firmament that this means a hard canopy that exists above the earth and separates waters above from the oceans below, and that the windows in this hard canopy open up and the water pours through as rain. I think it's a real question when they use this kind of language: is it meant to be a sort of primitive science? A literal description? I'm very skeptical of that. But that's at least an open question as to the degree to which primitive ancient science might be reflected in this narrative.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Later authors, I think, certainly did understand Genesis 1:1 in terms of *creatio ex nihilo*. For example, Isaiah 44:24 where God declares, “. . . I am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, who spread out the earth—Who was with me?” The implicit answer is no one was with him. God was alone in pristine isolation, and he then made all things according to Isaiah 44:24. Isaiah, I think, could never have countenanced the idea that existing alongside of God there was some kind of primordial matter or stuff which he did not create. Look also at Isaiah 45:18, “For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!).” God is the one who has made both the heavens and the earth. He is the creator of all things, according to Isaiah.

Similarly, in the creation Psalms we find that God is described as the creator of everything, and the implicit assumption is that there's nothing alongside of God which he did not create. For example, Psalm 33:9: “For he spoke and it came to be. He commanded and it stood forth.” Here's creation simply by God's almighty word – his command – and there is no recalcitrant stuff that he has to work with in order to create the world.

Similarly, Psalm 90:2: “Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” God here is the only everlasting being, without beginning from eternity to eternity, and everything else, even the mountains which seems so steadfast and firm in their existence, are created by God and therefore transitory unlike God himself. It would be unthinkable that there would have existed some uncreated stuff alongside God. *Creatio ex nihilo* is, I think, the implicit assumption of these creation Psalms.

Job is more explicit. Job 26:7 says, “He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the Earth upon nothing.” So here God is described as creating the world. He hangs the Earth upon literally nothing.



Proverbs 8:22-31 is an extremely interesting meditation on Genesis chapter 1. In this Proverb, God's Wisdom is personified as a female personage, and she speaks and says, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth" (Proverbs 8:22-24). Here Wisdom is created by God before the beginning of the world. I think especially significant is the claim that God's Wisdom was with the Lord even when the depths were not yet in existence. Because as someone earlier reminded us it is precisely the depths which Genesis chapter 1 and verse 2 describes when it describes his primordial water over which the Spirit of God was hovering. The author of Proverbs says before the depths were brought forth God existed with his Wisdom. It is God who created the depths, and then in Proverbs it goes on to describe how God took their measure and prescribed their limits.

So much for the Old Testament material. By the time we get to the intertestamental period it's generally agreed that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* does find very clear expression. For example, in the book of 2 Maccabees 7:28 we read, "Observe heaven and earth, consider all that is in them and acknowledge that God made them out of what did not exist, and that mankind comes into being in the same way." Maccabees is an apocryphal intertestamental book. Catholics include it in their canon, but Protestants do not. But it does bear witness to what Judaism believed during that intertestamental period. And in chapter 7 verse 28 you seem to have a clear statement of God's creation of the universe out of nothing.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* One of the points that I've seen Hugh Ross make in a lot of his debates is that Job was written first and would have been widely circulated before Genesis was written. The Job creation accounts would have been well known to the readers and writer of Genesis. So the Genesis account, he says, is supplementary information to the Job account.

*Dr. Craig:* Really? I would be very skeptical of dating Job in that way with any kind of confidence. I'd have to see some really good evidence for that. That surprises me. Have you looked into this at all?

*Student:* No, other than having read outside sources that say that Job was probably the first book of the Bible that was written down that predates all the others.

*Dr. Craig:* That would be interesting if Hugh Ross takes a late date for Genesis. I don't know what his dating for Genesis is.

*Student:* I don't know if he says late, but later than Job.

*Student:* What do we make of the statement that Christ made about us being with him before the beginning?

*Dr. Craig:* I don't think that he says anywhere that we were with him before the beginning. He says that he was with the Father before the beginning, which teaches the pre-existence of Christ prior to his incarnation – that Christ existed prior to his being born of Mary. But I don't think there's anything to suggest that we were about.

*Student:* Then portending to Wisdom – do we assume that Christ was with God before God created Wisdom?

*Dr. Craig:* It is characteristic of Jewish thought that various attributes of God would be reified or personified like his Wisdom and his Word. These are not thought to be entities that are actually distinct from God. These are just literary personifications of his attributes. Now, early church fathers did identify the Word with Jesus Christ because John 1 says that Christ is the Word who was with God and was God from the beginning. They frequently identified God's Wisdom with the Holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit was identified with Wisdom; Christ with the Word. But that's a result of later theological reflection. When you read this in Proverbs, there's no suggestion that this is a sort of Trinitarian passage. Quite the contrary, Wisdom talks about being created by God albeit before the world was made.

## **END DISCUSSION**

I think at this point it would be a good breaking point. What we'll do next time is look at New Testament material pertinent to *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>4</sup>

### **Lecture 3: *Creatio ex Nihilo* in the New Testament**

We've been looking at the scriptural data concerning *creatio ex nihilo*, and we saw that the Old Testament teaches the doctrine that God is the almighty creator of everything that exists other than God. We find this same doctrine repeated in the New Testament.

For example, in Romans 11:36, Paul, after quoting from Isaiah 40:13-14, declares, "for from him and through him and to him are all things." Here Paul says that all of reality finds its source in God. It is sustained by God and exists for God. God is the source, the sustainer, and the goal of all reality outside himself.

In Romans 4:17, Paul speaks of the God of Abraham as the one, "who gives life to the dead and who calls into existence the things that do not exist." That second phrase, I think, is so striking – God is the one who calls into existence things that do not exist. That is a statement of creation out of nothing.

Also, we find this doctrine in Hebrews 11:3. The author of this epistle says, "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear." The wording there is very interesting; it's rather awkward. The writer wants to affirm that God has created everything, and yet there is no stuff out of which God created all things. So, in effect, what he is saying is God has created all things but he did not create things out of things that appear and thus implies creation out of nothing.

In Revelation 4:11 we read that the beatified in heaven are said to sing to God these words: "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created." So the New Testament, like the Old Testament, thinks of God as the creator of everything that exists apart from himself.

But undoubtedly the most notable contribution of the New Testament to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is that it ascribes creation out of nothing to the pre-incarnate person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the Father's agent in creating the world. This is something genuinely new to the Old Testament doctrine.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul says, "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Here Paul says that God the Father is the source and the goal of all reality apart from himself, and that Christ is the one through whom all these things exist so he is the Father's agent in creation. In fact, Christ's role as the creator of everything other than God implies that he is himself God; that he is God since he is the creator of everything else.

John 1:1-3 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” Here John echoes the words of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning” was now the Word, the Word by which God creates, and he identifies this Word as God himself and then later in the chapter as Jesus Christ as the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. So the pre-incarnate Christ is with the Father in the beginning and is himself God, the creator of everything that exists other than God.

Also in Colossians 1:16-17, Paul says, “for in him [that is, Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” So this is again a picture of the cosmic Christ, the creator and the sustainer of all reality apart from God.

Similarly, in the epistle to the Hebrews once again – Hebrews 1:2-3 – we find this same doctrine. The author says, “but in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.” So, according to the author to the Hebrews, Christ is God’s agent in creating the world. He reflects the glory and the nature of God and brings the universe into existence and sustains the universe in being.

The similarity of these three chapters (Colossians 1, John 1, and Hebrews 1), all from different authors but teaching the same doctrine, shows that this understanding of the cosmic Christ was prominent in the theology of the primitive Christian church. The New Testament authors not only understood the Old Testament to be teaching *creatio ex nihilo* but they went further in identifying the pre-incarnate Christ as the principal agent of creation – remarkable!

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* While a lot of people would be willing to grant *creatio ex nihilo* (maybe with the exceptions of perhaps Mormons), I think there’s a lot of disagreement with respect to how that plays out – a sort of model of what that looks like. So my question is: do you think God has a substance that has causal powers? That’s meant to evoke a question that sort of maybe steps on the toes of friends who are classical theists. And do you have a preferred model of divine causal interaction?

*Dr. Craig:* It’s not just Mormons that would deny *creatio ex nihilo*. This is also denied by process theologians who are increasingly prominent today. Process theologians think that the world is the body of God; that God is the soul of the world, as it were. The relationship between our soul and our body is similar to God’s relationship to the world. And so for these thinkers the world is coeternal with God and uncreated. So it’s very

important to defend the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. I don't think there is any sort of particular model of causation by which God brings the universe into being because this is unique. All we can say is, I think, in classical terms that God is the efficient cause of creation. He's obviously not the material cause – the universe is not made out of God. He's not merely the final cause in the sense of a goal toward which the universe tends. But he's thought of to be the efficient cause of the universe. He produces it in being; he brings it into being. But I don't think there can be any sort of mechanism by means of that. It's a sheer act of the will. Some philosophers have compared God's action in the world to basic actions in my body. For example, when I will to lift my arm, it's not as though I will other things as intermediate steps to do that. It's a kind of basic action that is produced by my willing. I would say something like that is true also with God's relationship to the world. Creation is what we would call a basic action that is just the result of God's volition. He wills it to happen and there's an exercise of his causal power, and it does happen. But there isn't any kind of mechanism or linkage between the two.

*Student:* I think that God's causal activities is communication. He spoke it into existence. He could have thought it into existence, but the same thing would have happened. But he emphasizes communication, not only because he has it within himself, but that's the purpose to us – communication.

*Dr. Craig:* Given that God doesn't have vocal cords and makes audible sounds, I kind of liked the idea that you suggested about producing things by sheer thought. That is a kind of word – a kind of communication – but it doesn't need to be an audible utterance. When God existed alone and there was no other reality other than him and he says, *Let there be*, I don't think we need to imagine actual audible sounds. Indeed, how could there be? There was no air to carry the sound waves! It would be more like my ability to, by thinking, create a world in my imagination. Like when you dream, you create a whole dream world populated by people who do things and interact. These seem to be quite autonomous – don't they? – in dreams, especially nightmares when things are going wrong. These are produced immediately by your mental powers. Now, I hesitate to use the analogy because immediately someone will say, *Oh, you mean then the world is unreal; it's just like a dream in the mind of God*. No, no. That's not what one is suggesting. But it's an analogy to the way in which thought can be productive of effects.

*Student:* I think the same thing is with word. I mean, we could think something, and then we can say it. But here I think the fact that he delineated it that way as a concept is for us.

*Dr. Craig:* If we're prudent, we very often think before we speak, don't we? We think of what we're going to say rather than just blurting it out. In that case there really is kind of thought that precedes the actual utterance, and that thought would be primary, I think. Those are interesting thoughts.

*Student:* Can we say that since God is spirit, and Christ is the manifestation of that spirit linking the spirit and the material (or the mortal), can we say that even if the Word that he spoke was what the New Testament referred, that Christ created all this?

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, I do think that the New Testament authors in speaking of Christ as the Word are reflecting Genesis 1 where you have God's creation by his word where God says, *Let there be*. But the difference here is that, for someone like John in the prologue of the Gospel of John, the Word is a person. This Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. This is not just a thought or an utterance. But he makes it an actual person distinct from the Father. I thought you were going to go in the direction of the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit, and I would just refer back to our lectures on the Trinity where I don't think we can think of Christ as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit because he's very clear about distinguishing himself from the Holy Spirit. Remember his sayings to the disciples that, *It's to your advantage that I go away because if I don't go away the Spirit will not come to you, but if I go I will send him to you*. And he's speaking of the Holy Spirit there in the third person. So I think that the differentiation of the persons of the Trinity prevents us from conflating the Spirit with Christ in any way. I mentioned that the church fathers often liked to identify the Spirit with the Wisdom of God in the same way that the New Testament authors identified Christ with the Word of God. Remember Wisdom appears in Proverbs 8 as there in the beginning with God (*He created me before he created the depths and the mountains and so forth*). Very often the church fathers will speak of the Son and the Spirit as the Word and the Wisdom of the Father, but now, as I say, personified and not just as properties or attributes.

*Student:* I don't mean to equate Christ and Spirit because the Holy Spirit is still spirit – I mean spiritual. What I'm trying to say is that Christ is the link between the spirit and the mortal. It is in that sense he created the world because he manifests all that God had thought about and designed.

*Dr. Craig:* We have seen that Christ is in a sense the mediator of creation and that he is the one who creates the physical universe. But I wouldn't want to say anything that would imply that the Holy Spirit is not equally active in the world today. According to the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is the one who regenerates us, who fills us, who gifts us, who guides us. The Holy Spirit is also active in the world today in the absence of Jesus. Jesus has ascended to the Father. He says, *I'm going away but I'll send the Spirit in my place*. So I wouldn't want us to think that the Holy Spirit only acts through the medium of the second person of the Trinity. It seems to me that he's very active in the world today, and indeed in a sense stands in for Christ until the second coming of Christ.

*Student:* The Spirit is active, but human spirit is dead unless Christ comes and revives it. So the human spirit is void of its effect until Christ makes it alive.

*Dr. Craig:* All right. Now, there's truth in what you're saying – that the human spirit is dead apart from Christ. But who is the person who makes us alive spiritually? Romans 8:9 and following says, "you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness." You'll notice there the way the Holy Spirit and Christ becomes so closely identified that Paul will speak first of the Spirit of God then the Spirit of Christ and then finally just Christ. When we say "receive Christ" or "Christ comes into you" I think more technically we should say it is the Holy Spirit who comes into you, regenerates you, and fills you. He's the primary person. But because he is standing in for Christ and continuing the ministry of Christ in his absence, one can speak of Christ being in you because the Holy Spirit is standing in for Christ now and points us to Christ. But don't in any way depreciate the work of the Holy Spirit or the importance of his role in our world or in our lives.

*Student:* Am I incorrect in thinking that as Christ is God's agent of creation, and when it says in Scripture that God said, *Let there be light*, (and he said, *Let there be light*), or when it says, *In the beginning was the Word*, I've always kind of thought of the vocalization (not really a vocalization, but the words that are said or those terms that are used) were speaking as Christ. In other words, Christ is the agent. So when he said, *Let there be light*, it is emphasizing Christ as the agent by using terms that refer to words said. Is that accurate?

*Dr. Craig:* I don't want to try to read things into Genesis that aren't there. In the same way that it's wrong to try to read modern science back into Genesis, it's wrong to read New Testament doctrine and revelation back into Genesis that hadn't been revealed at that time. The whole idea of progressive revelation is that God's mysteries are unfolded over time and there are certain things that Paul talks about as mysteries – secrets – that have been kept by God until they're fully revealed through his apostles and through Christ. I think the Trinitarian persons would be one of these. So while we do want to say from a New Testament perspective that Christ is the agent of creation – yes, he was involved – let's just be careful not to read back into Genesis that when it says, *God said*, "*Let there be light*," that the author is referring to or thinking of Christ.

*Student:* But couldn't that be . . . I'm just asking . . . couldn't that be as we get further revelation we can think back to the Old. I'm not saying read into it, but is it more and more being revealed? Because in Genesis, Christ hadn't . . . Jesus hadn't been born. So to say that would not have been appropriate at the time. But as time progressed it seems to me it further explains Genesis.



*Dr. Craig:* Just so long as you're not claiming to give the interpretation of Genesis 1 as opposed to a later reflection upon it. That's certainly legitimate that, in light of Christ, we now reflect upon the creation event and Christ's role in it, and we will build a theology that will include Christ as God's agent of creation. That's quite right. But that's different from interpreting the text which, as you say, needs to be understood as the person who wrote it and the audience for whom he wrote how they would have understood it.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let me close this section on the biblical data by summarizing.

The biblical conception of God's relation to the world is therefore one of Creator to creature. Dualistic conceptions of God whereby God is confronted with an uncreated, eternally existing material which he then fashions into a cosmos are alien to the biblical writers. They think of God rather as all-powerful and the source of all reality outside of himself. He speaks and the universe springs into being created out of nothing through his incomparable power. "Before" the creation, if we can speak of that in quotation marks (causally before, not chronologically before), only God existed. There is a state of affairs in the actual world which is God existing alone without creation. We learn from the New Testament that creation results from his Word who is the pre-incarnate Christ. So it's not only inadequate to think of creation as a kind of mere fashioning of a pre-existent material, it's also inadequate to think of creation in terms of conserving or preserving something in being. The biblical doctrine of creation is inherently bound up with temporal considerations, and it implies that the universe began to exist at a time in the finite past at which it sprang into being from nothing by God's almighty Word. So creation is more than just fashioning, but it's also more than just conserving. It involves the idea of bringing something into existence out of nothing.

When we meet next time we will attempt to define more precisely in light of this biblical data exactly what is meant by *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>5</sup>

## Lecture 4: The Notion of “Bringing Something Into Being”

We’ve been talking about the biblical data concerning the doctrine of creation and in particular creation *ex nihilo*. Now as we begin our systematic summary of this doctrine we want to define more closely the notion of creation.

Intuitively, creation involves God’s bringing something into being so that if God creates some entity  $e$  at a time  $t$  then  $e$  comes into being at  $t$ . We can analyze this notion as follows:

$e$  comes into being at  $t$  iff . . .

(“if and only if,” that’s what “iff” means. It’s not a typo. It means “if and only if.” So we’re going to state necessary and sufficient conditions for  $e$ ’s coming into being at  $t$ .)

The first condition is, one, that  $e$  exists at  $t$ . Obviously if  $e$  comes into being at  $t$  then  $e$  must exist at  $t$ .

Secondly,  $t$  is the first time at which  $e$  exists.  $e$  did not exist prior to time  $t$ .  $t$  is the first time at which  $e$  exists.

Condition three would be that  $e$ ’s existing at  $t$  is a tensed fact. I’ll say something more about that third condition in a moment.

So  $e$  comes into being at  $t$  if and only if:  $e$  exists at  $t$ ,  $t$  is the first time at which  $e$  exists, and  $e$ ’s existing at  $t$  is a tensed fact.

This gives an analysis of creation. If we wanted to add that this creation is *ex nihilo* then we need to add a fourth condition here, and that is that  $e$  does not have a material cause. That will give you then creation out of nothing. This is creation. If you had a fourth condition that  $e$  has no material cause, that will give you creation out of nothing.

This is what it is for something to come into being at a time  $t$ .

So to say that God creates  $e$ , we can give necessary and sufficient conditions for that as well. God creates  $e$  at  $t$  if and only if God brings it about that  $e$  comes into being at  $t$ . God creates  $e$  at  $t$  if and only if God brings it about that  $e$  comes into being at  $t$ , and for  $e$  to come into being at  $t$  is for  $e$  to exist at  $t$ ,  $t$  is the first time in which  $e$  exists, and  $e$ ’s existing at  $t$  is a tensed fact.

So God’s creating  $e$  involves  $e$ ’s coming into being which is an absolute beginning of existence for  $e$ . It is not a transition from non-being to being. Rather, it is an absolute beginning of existence. In creation there is no entity on which the creator acts to bring about its effect. So it follows that creation is not a type of change since there’s no

enduring subject that goes from non-existence to existence. Rather, it is an absolute beginning of existence for the object that is created.

The doctrine of creation involves an important metaphysical feature which is typically underappreciated, and that is clause three here – that  $e$ 's existing at  $t$  is a tensed fact. I think that creation entails (or commits one to) a so-called tensed theory of time, or this is sometimes called an A-theory of time. That is to say, it is a theory of time that involves the objective reality of temporal becoming – things really do come to be and pass away. By contrast, if you adopt a tenseless theory of time (which is sometimes called the B-theory of time) then things don't really ever come into existence or go out of existence, rather things are just four-dimensional extended objects. They are not only extended in three dimensions of space, but they are also extended in the fourth dimension of time. They would begin to exist only in the sense that the extension along that temporal dimension would be finite in the earlier-than direction. If you follow the entity out in the earlier-than direction, along that dimension of time you'll come to a stopping point. But the universe on such a view doesn't come into being at that point. Whether it's finite in the past or infinite in the past, the four-dimensional entity just exists tenselessly. It doesn't really come to be.

So this third clause, I think, (that  $e$ 's existing at  $t$  is a tensed fact) is critical to capturing the idea of creation. In the absence of three, God's creation of the universe could be interpreted along the lines of a tenseless theory of time to merely postulate that the universe is ontologically dependent upon God and is finite in the earlier-than direction. I think that fails to capture the intuitive idea of creation which involves God's bringing something into being.

### **START DISCUSSION:**

*Student:* Are you saying then that in order for this to be accurate, time itself is part of that beginning? That's what starts the process?

*Dr. Craig:* I think what would be implied here would be if you think that God created time as well as the objects in the universe then time would itself have a beginning. That's right. So you could say that, say  $e$  is time. Time would exist at a moment  $t$ .  $t$  would be the first moment at which time exists. And in cosmology this is typically identified with  $t=0$  – the time of the Big Bang, or the time of the initial singularity. So  $t$  would be the first time at which time exists, and time's existing at  $t$  would be a tensed fact. You could apply this analysis to the beginning of time itself. That's an advantage of this analysis because if you, say, have a different analysis where you say something like this, " $e$  begins to exist at  $t$  if there is a time prior to  $t$  at which  $e$  does not exist," then that will lead to a self-contradiction if you apply it to time. Because in that case, you'd say time begins to exist at  $t$  if there is a time prior to  $t$  at which time does not exist. And that is self-contradictory.

So this analysis, I think, is superior in capturing the idea of “beginning to exist” because it will apply not only to physical objects but to time itself.

*Student:* And is that, as it stands, indicate that? Indicate that time did begin with *e*. Not necessarily what you put up there but it would fit into that.

*Dr. Craig:* It would fit this analysis. The analysis itself is neutral as to whether anything ever does begin to exist. It just is wanting to give us an understanding of when we say, *God creates e at t*, what does that mean to say that God creates *e* at *t*? Well, I think what it means is that God brings it about that *e* comes into being at *t*, and *e* comes into being at *t* if these conditions are met.

*Student:* I would think relativity would indicate a tenseless theory of time since different observers are going to see the same object come into being at different times from their point of view. Then I don't see how it really fits with a tensed theory of time where something would come into being at an absolute time.

*Dr. Craig:* This is a claim that is often made by proponents of a tenseless theory of time. I think the failure of this argument is due to not realizing that the special theory of relativity is susceptible to a variety of physical interpretations, and the tenseless interpretation (or space-time interpretation) that was advocated by Hermann Minkowski in 1908 and then later adopted by Einstein is only one possible interpretation of the theory. In Einstein's original 1905 paper he did not presuppose the four-dimensionalist tenseless perspective. On the contrary, he assumed that we were dealing with ordinary three-dimensional objects enduring through time. It's a tensed theory. In addition to that, the Dutch physicist Hendrik Lorentz enunciated a different interpretation of relativity according to which there is an absolute reference frame and an absolute time even if these are undetectable to us due to relativistic distortions of our clocks and measuring rods in uniform motion. So there are at least three different interpretations of the equations of relativity theory, and the equations are identical in all three. These are different physical interpretations of the equations: the original Einsteinian (which is tensed), the Minkowskian (which is the tenseless view), and the Lorentzian (which is compatible with a tensed version of time). Now, I don't want to get too far off the track going into this but if you are interested look at my book, *Time and Eternity*, published by Crossway where we go into this in much greater detail.

*Student:* It's my understanding that most modern scientists are Minkowskians and believe in a tenseless view.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes.

*Student:* With that being the case then the *kalam* cosmological argument is really just not applicable to them since they believe that nothing actually began to exist. So why then do

scientists like Stephen Hawking go to such great lengths to try to explain there's no beginning to the universe if it really doesn't matter to them?

*Dr. Craig:* Although I think that an adequate understanding of creation and beginning of existence involves a tensed theory of time, nevertheless there are tenseless, or B-theorists, who would feel very uncomfortable about saying something begins to exist at a time  $t$  without a cause. Imagine on a tenseless theory of time that a horse begins to exist at, say, 3 p.m. in the afternoon in this room. Even on a tenseless view, it would seem very strange that prior to that time there is no horse in this room and then at that time there is suddenly a horse in the room even if that horse is a four-dimensional object. Where did it come from and why? So even on a B-theory of time I think you can run a cosmological argument based on the beginning of the universe, but I think the argument will be much, much more powerful on a tensed, or A-theory, of time because then you've got something literally coming into existence – coming into being. And if there's no cause it literally comes into being from nothing which is, as I've often said, worse than magic. So the short answer would be: I think you can still do the cosmological argument on B-theory, but it's more powerful on the A-theory.

Let me just say one final thing. The reason I think that most physicists have the tenseless view is because this is what they've been taught in their textbooks. Since Minkowski your typical physics textbook presentation of the theory of relativity will be a four-dimensionalist's space-time interpretation, especially since general relativity came on the scene. So this is an almost unquestioned, unreflective result of physics textbooks and the presentation of the theory. But if you start reading literature on the philosophy of time and the philosophy of physics, you realize – well, wait a minute, you can't read the physical interpretation just off the shirtsleeve of the mathematical equations. The same is true with quantum theory. The equations of quantum theory are susceptible to nine or ten different interpretations physically, at least. With relativity, I'm aware of at least three. So one shouldn't be too impressed by just counting noses among contemporary physicists with regard to what theory of time they accept.

*Student:* The criterion you've stipulated presupposes that causation is a relation between substances whereas moderns tend to conceive of causation as a relation between events.

*Dr. Craig:* It doesn't really mention causation. What it mentions is creation, and I think we'd want to say that somebody creates something. Wouldn't you? That would seem strange to put in events as the subject and object of creation. Events don't create things, even if they cause things.

*Student:* I think we can probably integrate the tensed and tenseless theory together by looking at . . . God created the heavens and Earth for man. There is a communication – one is an initiator and one is a recipient. And for God, everything is tenseless, but to

bridge the communication he brings it into a tensed understanding so that we can know the beginning is the beginning of our communication that the time sets in.

*Dr. Craig:* Your point of view is one that is not infrequently defended today by certain philosophers and theologians. The idea would be that God's existence is a sort of tenseless existence whereas the time in which we live is tensed. My difficulty with those views is I cannot bring them into coherent relation with each other. I've argued this in the same book, *Time and Eternity*, if anyone is interested. It seems to me that in virtue of his omniscience God would know tensed facts like what's happening right now in the universe. But if he knows that then that locates him with respect to the now. He knows that, *We are now holding our Defenders class*, in contrast to, *The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is over*. He knows that. So his omniscience, it seems to me, would locate him in time. The other factor would be one that you mentioned – is that God's causal relationship with the universe is very difficult to understand if he is tenseless but time is tensed. Because how could God be tenselessly causing events in 2050 if those events do not in any sense exist? Remember, they're not up there on the timeline ahead waiting for us to arrive. If objective becoming is real there are no events in 2050 and there is no time called 2050. Those are just future potentialities. So how can God be tenselessly related to them? It's very hard to see. But I don't want to say that your view is indefensible or not widely represented. This is one alternative, an alternative that I'm not persuaded by. But there are folks who would defend that view. I'd refer you back to our discussion of the attributes of God and divine eternity. That's what this is closely connected with – how God relates to time.

In fact, let me just share one other thing that nobody has mentioned but I might as well since you brought up God's relationship to time. You may remember that the view that I defended was this kind of hybrid view that God is timeless without creation but temporal since creation. So God existing alone without creation is timeless, but God's existing with creation is temporal. Well, this definition would cause a problem for that because it would follow that God therefore begins to exist! God exists at time  $t$ .  $t$  is the first time at which God exists. And God's existing at time  $t$  would be a tensed fact. And yet, intuitively, on my theory, God doesn't begin to exist at  $t$ ; he begins to be temporal at  $t$ , but he doesn't begin to exist at  $t$ . So, in more sophisticated renditions of these conditions, what I also add is that  $t$  is the first time at which  $e$  exists and  $e$  does not exist timelessly. That would then eliminate the problem because God would exist timelessly without creation and then he would exist in time at the moment of creation.

*Student:* Can you clarify the difference between timeless and tenseless?

*Dr. Craig:* Very, very good question. Thank you. On a tenseless view of time, there is a dimension or reality called time which is ordered by relations of earlier-than and later-

than. This serves to distinguish this dimension from dimensions of space. Space is not ordered by anything like earlier-than and later-than relations. So on a tenseless theory of time, if we imagine that the universe begins to exist at  $t=0$  and then it expands and, say, for the sake of argument then it re-contracts again, time is that internal dimension that runs from  $t=0$  to the final moment. That is time. So anything that exists in space-time will have spatio-temporal coordinates. It will have three spatial coordinates and it will have a coordinate with respect to this dimension of time. But notice on this tenseless theory all moments of time whether past with respect to X or simultaneous with respect to X or future with respect to X are equally real. Things don't come into being and pass away. They are just there in a tenseless sense. Right? They are not timeless. They are ordered according to this temporal dimension. They have a time coordinate, but they're tenseless in the sense that they are not absolutely past, present, or future. On this view, past, present, or future is an illusion of human consciousness. Events in 2050 are present for the people in 2050 but they're future for us. And for people at 2075 they're past. So there really is no absolute past, present, or future on this view and hence no tenses in an objective sense. The "now" in time would be comparable to the "here" in space. For us in Atlanta, Atlanta is here. But for the people in Cambridge, Atlanta is there and Cambridge is here. It is just perspectival. And so there are no objective tenses on this view. Now, if God does not exist in space-time but he's out here and he is causally creating all of the events in space-time then God would be timeless. Right? He's not in space-time; he doesn't have a temporal coordinate. So God would be timeless. But things that can be ordered according to that temporal dimension would be in tenseless time.

Now, let me ask if that helped. Is that clear? OK, good. So that highlights the difference between these two theories of time.

## **END DISCUSSION**

What I'm suggesting is that this theory of time doesn't adequately capture the idea of creation. Why? Because on this view in a sense the creation is co-eternal with God. God never exists alone. There's "always" this ("always" in quotation marks) tenselessly existing space-time reality with God. God is not ever alone, and so he doesn't really bring the universe into being. He doesn't really create the universe. At the very most you would just say that the universe depends on God ontologically for its existence. It would be conserved in being but not created in being. We'll talk about conservation in the future as we deal with doctrine of creation – what is it to conserve something in being as opposed to create something? My argument here is that creation involves inherently the idea of bringing something into existence, and that can only happen on an A-theory (or tensed theory) of time, not on a tenseless theory.<sup>6</sup>



## Lecture 5: Arguments for *creatio ex nihilo*

We've been talking about the definition of *creatio ex nihilo*, and I offered three conditions that are necessary and sufficient for something beginning to exist. The third of those was that the events existing at the time  $t$  is a tensed fact. Someone has asked me to review the difference between the tensed and tenseless theories of time because that's not entirely clear.

These are sometimes called the A-theory versus the B-theory of time. The way you can remember this is that the B-theory is like a loaf of bread (B for bread). So imagine a loaf of bread that is then sliced into particular slices, and all of the slices are equally real and exist in this loaf. Those slices of the loaf of bread are like time slices – this could be 2018, that slice up there might be 2050, this slice back there might be 1950. All of the slices of the loaf of bread are equally real and exist. By contrast, on the tensed theory of time, only the present slice exists. The other slices are unreal; they haven't yet come into being. So only the present (only the now) exists and past and future moments are unreal. If you can remember “B is for bread” then you can remember that the B-theory, or tenseless theory, of time is like a loaf of bread where all the slices are equally real, and the A-theory, or tensed theory, is like a single slice of bread where only one slice (namely, the now, the present, slice) exists.

Since I don't believe in the B-theory of time I've also thought we could have beef or bologna instead of bread. Bologna is sliced up, too, like that, and that would have the additional advantage of seeing that the B-theory isn't right. *[laughter]*

### START DISCUSSION

*Student:* In explaining the B-theory I've used the analogy of flipbook animation. We've all seen maybe an animation of Superman or someone beating someone up. You take the pages and they flip really fast and it looks like Superman is doing something. In those cases, there's not really one Superman – there's several drawings going on.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, that's right.

*Student:* There's just this illusion of a single Superman going on. What do you think of that analogy?

*Dr. Craig:* I like it. The analogy to the B-theory would be that all of the slices of the book exist – or all the pages of the book exist. In that sense it's like the B-theory of time, the moments which all exist. The interesting thing that your analogy highlights is that the person who exists on one slice is not the same person as who exists on the other slice. You do not endure through time on this view; rather you are a four-dimensional object and what exists at any time is just a three dimensional slice of you like the drawing of Superman on one page compared to the drawing of Superman on another page. So this

view has pretty radical implications about personal identity over time – namely, you're not the same person who walked into the class this morning. You're a different slice of this four-dimensional object.

*Student:* In the broader sense though, isn't it humans are tensed (A-theory) but for God time is B?

*Dr. Craig:* Well, I want to refer you back to our lessons on divine eternity and God's relationship to time where we discussed that. This would take us to far afield at this point so I don't want to revisit that. But that was discussed in our lessons on divine eternity which are available at ReasonableFaith.org in the section on Defenders podcasts.<sup>7</sup>

*Student:* I don't necessarily have a question about the difference but I am curious as to why they couldn't both exist?

*Dr. Craig:* Because they're mutually contradictory with each other. According to the A-theory, the people in 2050 do not in any sense exist, and on the B-theory they do exist and they're just as real as you are. So these are radically different ontologies of what is real. On the A-theory things come into being and go out of being, but on the B-Theory nothing really comes into being. Remember I said that on the B-theory of time, to say that the universe had a beginning just means that the loaf which is the universe has a heel on the front edge. There's a heel to the loaf of bread before which there isn't another slice. That's all it means to have a beginning. But it doesn't come into existence at that point the way it would on the A-theory. The difference between the two, I think, lies in the objectivity of temporal becoming. Do things really come to be and pass away, or is that just an illusion like the illusion of motion of Superman as you flip through the pages rapidly?

*Student:* On the B-theory, how thin can you slice that bread?

*Dr. Craig:* Instants. You can do it down to instants if you want. If you think of time as a continuum so that between any two points there's always another point, you can have instants of time.

## **END DISCUSSION**

The relevance of this (in case especially some of you visitors are wondering, *What is the relevance of this?*) is that I suggested that the doctrine of creation out of nothing is committed to the tensed theory of time because according to the doctrine of creation there is a state of affairs in the actual world which consists of God existing alone without anything else. He then brings the universe into being. So to say that God creates the

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For example, see Defenders Series 3, Doctrine of God, Lecture 6 at <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/s3-doctrine-of-god-attributes-of-god/doctrine-of-god-part-6/> (accessed June 24, 2018).

universe at a time  $t$  is to say that God brings it about that the universe comes into being at time  $t$ . I'm convinced that an adequate explication of *creatio ex nihilo* does involve commitment to a tensed, or A-theory, of time.

We now want to turn to arguments for *creatio ex nihilo*. Early church fathers, though they were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, broke decisively with that Greek tradition concerning one doctrine, and that was *creatio ex nihilo*. They recognized clearly that the Greek view of the eternity of matter was incompatible with the biblical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. They rejected the teachings of Aristotle on that subject. Aristotle argued that the universe is eternal in the past and that matter never began to exist. There evolved a tradition within early Christian theology of defending the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The last great champion of *creatio ex nihilo* in the pre-Islamic era was the Alexandrian commentator and philosopher John Philoponus – not exactly a household name but nevertheless the fount of the *kalam* cosmological argument. Philoponus developed all sorts of fascinating arguments aimed at proving the finitude of the past and the impossibility of an infinite regress of past events and thus a beginning of the universe in support of *creatio ex nihilo*. When Islam swept across North Africa they absorbed this tradition, and these arguments were taken up and developed with great sophistication by medieval Islamic theologians. These Islamic thinkers lived side by side with Jewish theologians in Muslim Spain. By the mediation of the Jews these arguments then were reintroduced into Christian Europe where they became the subject of much controversy, pitting, for example, such great thinkers as Saint Bonaventure, who supported the arguments for *creatio ex nihilo*, against Thomas Aquinas, who thought that they were mere probability arguments and not strict demonstrations and therefore should not be used in Christian theology.

Eventually this tradition of argumentation came to something of a sputtering close in the work of the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* published in 1781. In the so-called first antinomy concerning time, Kant argues that time cannot be infinite in the past and that the series of past events must therefore have had a beginning. This is, I think, undoubtedly the most visible legacy of this tradition.

These arguments, when reformulated in light of modern thought, I think are of great interest. They have become especially relevant in light of twentieth-century cosmology which seems to provide empirical evidence for the finitude of the past and the beginning of the universe. There are philosophical arguments and scientific confirmation for this key premise that the universe began to exist.

We've covered this so-called *kalam* cosmological argument when we discussed arguments for the existence of God. *kalam* is the Arabic word which denotes medieval Islamic theology. In view of the contribution of these Muslim theologians to this version

of the argument I have dubbed it the *kalam* cosmological argument. Since we've already covered these, I don't want to go into them in detail now. I'll just review them very briefly and refer you to our discussion at ReasonableFaith.org in the Defenders class on the excursus on natural theology where we talk about arguments for God's existence.<sup>8</sup>

I presented two philosophical arguments in support of the beginning of the universe. The first is the argument based on the impossibility of the existence of an actually infinite number of things. The argument here is that an actually infinite number of things leads to inherently paradoxical counterintuitive situations that cannot be instantiated in reality. But if the universe is past-eternal then an actually infinite number of past events has been instantiated in reality. It would follow from this that therefore the series of past events cannot be actually infinite. It must be finite. Therefore the universe began to exist.

The second philosophical argument is quite independent of that. It doesn't presuppose that an actually infinite number of things cannot exist. Rather, the second argument says that a collection having an actually infinite number of members cannot be formed by successive addition, that is to say, by adding one member at a time. The only way that God could create an actually infinite number of things would be by creating them all at once – *Let there be!* – and there would be an actually infinite number of things. But even God couldn't create it by adding one member at a time because, if you try to think about counting to infinity, for any number  $N$  that you pick,  $N+1$  is always going to be a finite number. You're never going to arrive at infinity. Similarly, trying to count down from infinity seems even more bizarre. To imagine that never having begun one could count down to the present moment would be like counting down all of the negative numbers and ending at zero which is an intuitively bizarre task and leads to all sorts of absurdities. If an A-theory of time is correct then the series of past events has been formed by successive addition. The past does not exist whole and entire; rather it has come to be one event at a time, one event happening upon the heels of the others as things come into being and pass away. So on an A-theory of time, the series of past events is a collection of items formed by successive addition. And since no such collection can be actually infinite, it follows that the collection of past events must be finite and therefore began to exist.

That is, as I say, a very quick capsule summary of these two arguments.

If that were not enough, we now have very powerful scientific confirmation of the arguments for the finitude of the past and the beginning of the universe. These are listed as two in number. First is Big Bang cosmology. Prior to the 1920s, the standard view in

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8 See Defenders Series 3, Excursus on Natural Theology, Lecture 8 at <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/s3-excursus-on-natural-theology/excursus-on-natural-theology-part-8/> (accessed June 24, 2018).

science was that the universe is eternal. It just exists and never began to exist. But when Einstein applied his general theory of relativity to the universe as a whole, what he was shocked to discover is that such a stable, static universe is impossible. The universe would either be in a state of cosmic expansion or else a cosmic implosion collapsing in upon itself. By taking this aspect of the theory seriously, scientists in the early 20s were able to formulate models of an expanding universe. As you trace the expansion of the universe back in time, the universe grows denser and denser and denser until finally you arrive at a point of infinite density before which the universe did not exist. This represents a boundary to space and time. On the standard Big Bang model, not only all matter and energy but physical space and time themselves come into being at the Big Bang. The standard model will need to be revised in certain ways as is well-known, but none of these revisions serves to undo the fundamental prediction of the finitude of the past and the beginning of the universe. Indeed, according to Alexander Vilenkin, a very famous cosmologist at Tufts University, there simply are no tenable models of the universe that are beginningless. He says that this gives us confidence that such models simply cannot be developed. Any empirically and mathematically adequate model of the universe will involve a beginning.

Secondly, we have the evidence of thermodynamics. When the laws of thermodynamics are applied to the universe as a whole, you find that the universe is increasing in its entropy – that is the amount of unusable energy. Given enough time eventually all the stars will burn out and all matter will collapse into dead stars and black holes. Eventually the black holes themselves may evaporate. The universe will become nothing but an ultra-thin gas of elementary particles endlessly expanding into endless darkness and the cold recesses of space. There will be no heat, there will be no life, there will be no light. Only the thin gas of elementary particles expanding into the infinite blackness. The question is: if, given enough time, this will happen then why has it not already happened if the universe is infinite in the past? Given the infinitude of past time, the universe should now be in a dark, dilute, lifeless state. But it's not. It's in a state of disequilibrium. This suggests that the universe, in fact, began to exist, and that its initial low entropy condition was simply put in as an initial condition and it has been winding down since that point until today. So the evidence of thermodynamics also supports the notion that the universe began to exist just as Big Bang cosmology says.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I followed what you said, and it made complete sense. Just one question on infinite – we can't have an infinite number of things. The Big Bang model (which I know what it is but I don't really know the science) – how can you have a point of infinite density that it all starts from?

*Dr. Craig:* Very good question. I would say that this initial singularity or point at which spacetime curvature becomes infinite is a mathematical idealization. I do not think that it is a physical state of reality, but it represents the point at which the time-reversed universe disappears. So it's an idealization.

*Student:* I know someone like Oppy would take the singularity to not be an idealization but something physical, so how do you distinguish between what's an idealization and what isn't? The second part of the question was: you equate the boundary point of the universe with the beginning of the universe, whereas I know a lot of cosmologists want to say, no, there's an area of quantum gravity that preceded that.

*Dr. Craig:* Let's take the second question first. On the standard Big Bang model, quantum effects are not taken into account. So general relativity predicts that the universe will shrink back to this beginning point  $t=0$  which is this singular point, and it is true what I said that on the standard model the singularity represents the beginning of the universe. But general relativity breaks down when you get to certain extreme densities, and so scientists are trying to find a quantum theory of gravity that would enable us to describe this earliest split-second of the universe. People like James Hartle and Stephen Hawking have proposed a model in which the initial singularity is rounded off rather like a badminton birdie so that the universe does not reach a singular point and the laws of physics can describe the universe all the way back. But nonetheless, as you note, the universe still has a beginning on this model. Vilenkin, himself is a quantum cosmologist, who says, as I indicated, that there are no models (quantum or otherwise) that are beginningless that are adequate. Any adequate theory, such as perhaps the Hartle-Hawking model, though in not having a singular boundary point will still be finite in the past and have a beginning. So although my explication of this point appealed to the standard model, as I said the standard model will need to be revised. But those revisions are not such as to annul the fundamental prediction that the universe began to exist. So, in response to that first point, you don't really need the singularity to be real or not. It's probably not real because it's based on the general theory of relativity and it represents simply a mathematical point.

*Student:* It seems to me like you have to be talking about parallel universes. How can you have like model B if you don't have space? If the universe is expanding, what's it expanding in?

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, all right. Good question. When theorists talk about the universe expanding, they are not presupposing that it's embedded in some higher dimension into which it is expanding. That would be illicit. That would be to posit some space above space in which our universe is expanding. Rather, think of it in this way. Think about a globe. Imagine that there are buttons glued onto the surface of this globe. As time goes



on, the globe gets bigger in the sense that these buttons recede from one another and grow farther and farther apart as time goes on. It is in this internal sense that the universe is expanding. The distance between these fundamental particles, like these buttons here, grows with time. But you should not think that this globe is embedded in a higher dimension into which it is expanding. It is an internal analysis of the expansion that they're talking about, not that there is something out there into which space is expanding.

*Student:* With this rounded model, you've got the cone that's rounded. Is it still nothing in the beginning? There's nothing? That's a difficult concept.

*Dr. Craig:* We're going to talk a little bit more about that later but it is still true that there . . . Imagine the South Pole here on this rounded hemisphere. There's nothing prior to that South Pole. There's no time, there's no space, there's no matter, no energy. Hawking will call it the beginning of the universe. It's just not a singular beginning. It's not a boundary point. It's like any other point in spacetime. But, yes, this is still *creatio ex nihilo* in the sense that there is not anything prior to this point. Remember – this is so crucial – that when we talk about *creatio ex nihilo* we do not mean that there was a state prior to the universe and that was a state of nothing. That would be to posit something instead of nothing. Rather, to say that the universe is created *ex nihilo* means that the universe began to exist at a point and there was not anything prior to that point. That's our definition of what it means to begin to exist. Remember? *e* exists at time *t*, and *t* is the first time at which *e* exists. That's true on these models as well.

*Student:* Could you remind me what state God was in at that point?

*Dr. Craig:* Well, this is disputed among Christian theologians. Some Christian theologians, as I think someone was alluding to, believe that God is strictly timeless. Other theologians think no, God is in time. He has an infinite past and an infinite future and that he is infinite throughout time – omnitemporal, if you will. My view is a kind of hybrid view. I think that God is timeless *sans* creation, and in time subsequent to creation. So I would say that God existing alone is changeless and timeless, but with the creation of the first event God enters into time in virtue of his relationship with that event and every event thereafter. So God is timeless *sans* creation and in time since creation. Again, I want to refer you back to the Defenders lectures on the attributes of God when we talked about God's eternity and his relationship to time. That's at ReasonableFaith.org under the Defenders series.

*Student:* How is that different from a Christian idealist view of God and time in the universe?

*Dr. Craig:* Well, now, I think that many Christian idealists would probably think of God as being strictly timeless and that God doesn't exist in time. There aren't very many of those folks around today. I'm trying to think back to classical German idealists, and I



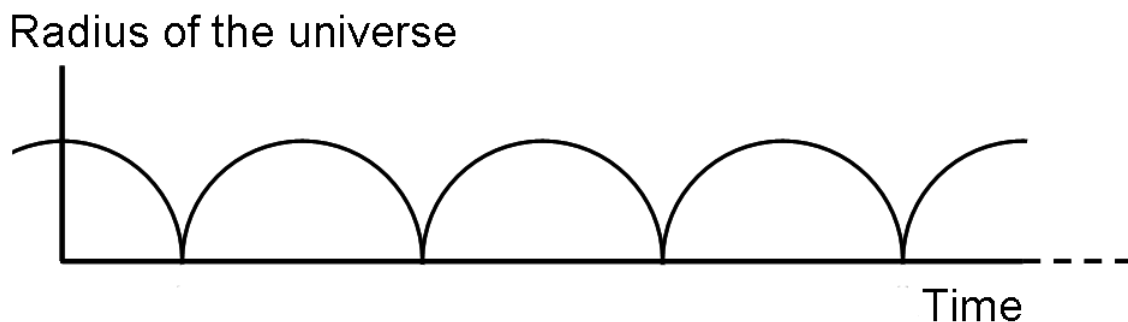
think that the prevailing view would probably be divine timelessness. But don't hold me to it. They are welcome to develop their own models of divine eternity.

*Student:* I guess it's semantics, but when you say there was nothing when God created, God's Spirit was there but it wasn't in anything. It was just God.

*Dr. Craig:* I don't think I said there was nothing. What I said is there's nothing prior to that point. That's even true of God because God isn't prior to that point. Right? Otherwise there would be time, and yet this is the beginning of time. God's priority to the Big Bang is a causal priority. It's not a chronological priority. Right? Because time begins at  $t=0$ , so God doesn't exist prior to the Big Bang in a chronological sense. But he is causally prior, or explanatorily prior, to the Big Bang even if in such a state of isolation he is strictly timeless.

*Student:* I don't really have much of a background in science but I was thinking about what you said in terms of if we indulge the death of the universe then wouldn't this at some point have already happened and we would already be in a frozen wasteland of sorts. If we do indulge this idea of heat death where we've maximized entropy and we have no thermodynamically free energy and this could have happened before, would that mean that . . . I guess I'm struggling to see how the universe could come into being after that point if you have no heat in order to create work.

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, I think you're quite right. During the 1960s, some cosmologists who were very uncomfortable with the standard Big Bang model and the beginning of the universe tried to escape this by saying maybe the universe oscillates and it expands and then contracts, expands and then contracts, expands and contracts, like an accordion from eternity past so that as you trace the expansion of the universe back in time – [*Dr. Craig draws figure 1 on the whiteboard*] letting the horizontal line here be time – the expansions of the universe would be rather like this going back to eternity.



*Figure 1*

But what they failed to realize is that entropy is conserved from cycle to cycle. This has the effect of generating a longer expansion time and a larger expansion radius with each

successive cycle. So, in fact, the way the universe would look would be like this [Dr. Craig draws figure 2 on the whiteboard], and therefore it would still have an initial smallest first cycle and a beginning.

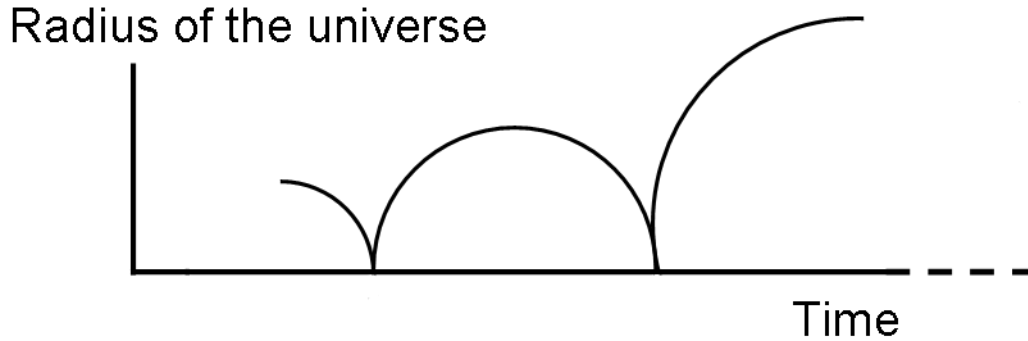


Figure 2

In fact, Joseph Silk, the astronomer, estimates that the universe cannot have gone through more than about 150 prior oscillations based on the current entropy levels in the universe. Even if it could oscillate, it couldn't have done so from eternity. This model would also involve a fine-tuning of an extremely bizarre and infinite precise character to enable the universe to match each expansion and contraction exactly right rather than exploding into an unending expansion at some point. So these oscillating models are really out of favor now.

## END DISCUSSION

What we will do next time then, having just briefly reviewed these arguments for creation out of nothing, is we will look at objections to *creatio ex nihilo*. I think you'll find that some of these are very entertaining because I've taken some of them from the Internet as well as from scientists like Lawrence Krauss and Stephen Hawking. We'll see what objections have been offered to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>9</sup>

## Lecture 6: Objections to *creatio ex nihilo*

Today we want to consider objections to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Objections to this doctrine may take the form of either objections to the *ex nihilo* part of the formula or to the *creatio* part of the formula. Objections to the *ex nihilo* part say that creation cannot be *ex nihilo*. It is impossible to create something *ex nihilo*. While objections to the *creatio* part of the formula contend that coming into being *ex nihilo* is easy and therefore there's no need for *creatio*. So these objections are polar opposites, and yet you find both of them pressed against *creatio ex nihilo*.

Before we look at these objections, I want to clear up a possible misunderstanding that was evident on our Reasonable Faith Facebook page this past week in response to last week's lesson. One person objected that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is incompatible with the principle that “out of nothing, nothing comes.” If “out of nothing, nothing comes” then you can't have a *creatio ex nihilo*. What this fails to understand is the meaning of the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* is the Latin for “out of nothing, nothing comes.” What this principle means is that something cannot come into being uncaused. Being only comes from being, and therefore it's impossible for something to come into being from non-being – to come into being without a cause. And of course that doesn't contradict *creatio ex nihilo* because *creatio ex nihilo* precisely affirms that there is a cause which brings something into being from nothing like the universe. So these principles actually are quite distinct from each other and don't contradict each other. On the contrary, people who hold to *creatio ex nihilo* do so because they think that it's impossible for something to come into being without a cause.

Let's turn first to objections to the *ex nihilo* part of the formula. The first objection we'll consider comes from Question of the Week number 216 on our website ReasonableFaith.org.<sup>10</sup> The reader there said, “We've never seen something which doesn't exist caused to begin existing. Things which don't exist can't be caused to ‘do’ anything, since they aren't \*there\* to be influenced by a cause.” Therefore creation from nothing is impossible. This objection is nothing but a rehearsal of the fallacious assumption that causing something to begin to exist involves acting upon a non-existent object and bringing it into existence. But as we've seen, creation is not a type of change because there is no subsisting object which endures from one state to another. In creation, an object does not move from a state of non-existence to a state of existence. Rather, it simply begins to exist at the moment that it is created. So this first objection is fallacious.

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10 See <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/must-everything-that-begins-to-exist-have-a-material-cause/> (accessed July 1, 2018).

I was asked to repeat the last line. In creation an object doesn't move from a state of non-existence to existence. Rather, it simply begins to exist at the moment of its creation. In other words, creation is not a type of change as this objection assumes.

Let's go to the second objection. This comes from Question of the Week number 240 at ReasonableFaith.org.<sup>11</sup> This reader says,

For a casual event to occur, you would need potentiality and an agent . . . to actualize it.

For example, a block of wood has the potentiality to be carved into a wooden train, and a skilled worker would be the agent which actualizes the possibility of a wooden train carved from said block of wood.

However . . . God's initial act of causation was different . . . as it did not involve a material cause, but only an efficient cause. But here comes the problem, by taking out the material cause from the initial act of creation, aren't you taking out the potentiality of God creating anything. The material cause seems to be the carrier of the potential in the act of causation. So when you rule out a material cause, you are simultaneously ruling out the potentiality of an agent causing anything. . . .

Therefore, since creation ex-nil-ho tries to bring an object/agent out of nothing (with no potentiality), it is logically impossible.

In response to this objection, I agree that a causal event requires an agent to actualize the event and the potentiality of the event to occur. Moreover, I also agree that “nothingness” (in quotation marks) contains no potentiality or else it would be something. But it doesn't follow from that that *creatio ex nihilo* is impossible. That inference assumes that in *creatio ex nihilo* the potentiality of the universe's existence must lie (impossibly) in the nothingness that preceded it. But, as Thomas Aquinas pointed out, in *creatio ex nihilo* the potentiality of the universe lay in the power of God to create it. Since God has the power to create the universe, then even in the state of affairs of God existing alone, there is the potential for the universe to exist. That potential resides, not in some non-existent object or in nothing, but rather it lies in God himself and his ability to cause the universe.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* If God exists, isn't *ex nihilo* by definition untrue?

*Dr. Craig:* No, because that goes back to the misunderstanding at the very beginning. When it is said *ex nihilo nihil fit* – that out of nothing, nothing comes – what that means is that something can't come into being without a cause. But in *creatio ex nihilo* there is a

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/must-the-universe-have-a-material-cause/> (accessed July 1, 2018).

cause. The universe doesn't come into being from nothing; it's caused to come into being by God. There is an efficient cause, but as the reader just pointed out, there is no material cause. So don't think that because there is no material cause that means that the existence of the universe is uncaused.

*Student:* I've noticed that in a lot of these objections the objector tends to reify "nothing" in a sense. Do you think what's really going on in some of these objections is that they're implicitly assuming (and this goes to your work on abstract objects) this criterion of ontological commitment? So if I speak of nothing, nothing must exist?

*Dr. Craig:* Okay, this is a very perceptive question. Let me give a little background because it's a little technical. I think the short answer is yes. We use expressions which are called singular terms to refer to things. Singular terms are things like definite descriptions, like "the man in the pink shirt," "the fellow wearing the American flag shirt," and things of that sort. Definite descriptions that pick out a certain thing. Or they include proper names like Jim or Bill or Susan. Or they include what are called indexical terms like "that table," "this chair." These are called singular terms because they have referents. They refer to things. As I'll comment later on, the people who often press these objections think that because the word "nothing" is a pronoun and can be used as the subject of a sentence or the direct object of a sentence that therefore it's a singular term that refers to something. By taking it as a singular term, as you put it they reify "nothing" into something thinking that this word "nothing" refers to some thing. That's simply that they've been misled by language. The word "nothing" – and I'll give some other examples later – are actually not singular terms; they're quantifier terms. They are words like "every," "all," "none," and "no." They quantify how many things there are. So "nothing" is really a quantifier term meaning "not anything." So it isn't a singular term. It doesn't refer to anything. You are right, I think, that a lot of these objections think that the word "nothing" in English is a singular term referring to something which is just utterly misconceived.

*Student:* Would you consider the Christian idealist to view God to play the role of the material in carrying the property – the potentiality? He says it has to be true if you consider it's continuous all the way back to his creation.

*Dr. Craig:* It depends on what you mean by Christian idealism, but I would take a Christian idealist to be someone who denies the reality of space and time and physical matter and energy. Rather, he thinks of things as rather like ideas in the mind of God. In that case, God isn't the material cause of these things because these things aren't made out of God. That would be pantheism. Rather, I think he would also say that God is the efficient cause of these things, and there just is no material cause. Indeed, I would say the Christian idealist has an easy time with these objections to *creatio ex nihilo* because for

him it just means that God has mentally thought of these things just as I can dream or envision something in my mind and bring all sorts of things into existence in that way. This is a very recondite debate between those who believe in physical objects and space and time and those who think, no, in fact all reality is ultimately mental in nature.

*Student:* With regard to the proposition that “out of nothing, nothing comes,” I actually, out of curiosity, did a search for this in the philosophical literature and didn't find any references.

*Dr. Craig:* You did not?

*Student:* I didn't. I found two papers on Aquinas that really seemed to me to be irrelevant. So while it's possible that I'm missing a literature on this, I wonder if you are framing as more uncontroversial than it is that principle, or if perhaps it's something you take to be obvious but other philosophers . . .

*Dr. Craig:* No, no. I can give you references. The principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* – look that up perhaps in Latin. This is a standard metaphysical principle, and it goes all the way back to Plato and Parmenides. I can show you texts in Plato's *Timaeus* where he talks about the impossibility of being coming from non-being. This was the whole point of Parmenides – that being only comes from being. Parmenides took that to mean that therefore there is no change. He took it in a very radical direction. But the fundamental principle that being arises only from being is as ancient as philosophy itself.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's move on to our third objection which is, I think, a more serious objection. This one comes from the philosopher Wes Morriston. He enunciates another empirical generalization that he thinks enjoys comparable support to the causal principle that everything that begins to exist has a cause. Namely, his principle is everything that begins to exist has a material cause. Notice that Morriston's principle is not incompatible with the causal principle that is enunciated in the argument for the beginning of the universe which is that everything that begins to exist has a cause. That's not incompatible with saying everything that begins to exist has a material cause. But Morriston's principle would require that the universe has a material cause and therefore *creatio ex nihilo* is impossible.

In response, the causal premise of the cosmological argument (namely, “everything that begins to exist has a cause”) leaves it an open question whether that cause is an efficient cause or a material cause. Therefore, that principle is actually much more modest than Morriston's principle. It's the objector then who has the burden of proof to show that every instance of efficient causation must also be coincident with an instance of material

causation as well. He has to show that his more radical principle is true in addition to the principle in the *kalam* cosmological argument.

I think we would all admit that the inductive evidence for Morrison's principle that everything that begins to exist has a material cause is indeed very impressive. But it's not of comparable force to the arguments that I present in favor of the causal premise of the cosmological argument. I present three arguments for the premise that everything that begins to exist has a cause. Namely, number one: something cannot come from nothing. Two: if something can come into being from nothing then it becomes inexplicable why just anything and everything doesn't come into being from nothing. Then number three: common experience and scientific evidence confirm the truth of this causal principle. Notice only the third of those reasons is an inductive argument based on experience. This is the only one of the three that you might think could be matched by the inductive evidence in support of Morrison's principle that everything that begins to exist has a material cause, though in a moment I'm going to explain how contemporary cosmogony, I think, provides an apparently powerful counter-example to Morrison's principle. But the main point that I want to make here is that the main grounds for affirming the causal principle are not inductive but rather they are metaphysical arguments for the first premise, not inductive evidence. These are not matched by comparable metaphysical grounds for Morrison's principle that everything that begins to exist has to have a material cause.

Moreover, and here I come to the point I alluded to, the empirical evidence for Morrison's principle can be overridden. He has good inductive evidence for the principle, but it can be overridden. Once we reach the conclusion of the *kalam* cosmological argument – namely, “therefore the universe has a cause” – once you reach that conclusion, we must now inquire as to the nature of that cause. Is it, or can it be, a material object? Both the philosophical arguments and the scientific confirmations of the premise that the universe began to exist preclude that the cause of the universe is a material object. For, in the first place, if there cannot be an infinite regress of events then it is physically impossible that the cause of the universe be a material object. Because material objects are always in constant change at least on the molecular and atomic levels so there would be an infinite regress of events. Likewise, secondly, the scientific evidence supports the conclusion that the origin of the universe was absolute in the sense that all matter and energy, indeed even physical space and time themselves, came into being a finite time ago. So I think we have really good grounds both philosophically and scientifically for affirming the immateriality of the first cause.

So the origin of the universe, I think, requires an efficient cause of enormous power which created physical time, space, matter, and energy. It is an instance of efficient, but not material, causation. If this is thought to be somehow metaphysically impossible then



some compelling overriding argument needs to be given for that conclusion, and I have yet to encounter any such argument.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Couldn't you say that Wes Morriston is confusing an accidental property of things in the universe with an essential property?

*Dr. Craig:* I think so. Up until 1968 it was an inductively well-established principle that all human beings have lived on the face of the earth. Right? Until we sent a man to the moon. But that was just an inductive accidental generalization about human beings. There wasn't anything essential to human beings that made them earthbound. I suspect that it's very much the same here. Yes, inductively all of the physical objects that we see come into being have material causes, but that could just be an accidental quality of these objects. Indeed, if *creatio ex nihilo*, as Christian theologians have traditionally believed, is a prerogative that belongs to God alone then we shouldn't be surprised to see that the inductive evidence for material causation is so powerful.

*Student:* Going back to your 1996 debate with Quentin Smith, he argued that the *kalam* cosmological argument is an argument for atheism in that the universe requires a cause but if we analyze what a cause is, it's something that brings something else about, but it does not logically entail its effect. Whereas God willing something as a function of him being omnipotent must occur logically unless he were somehow to will something logically impossible which is probably incoherent. So, again, Smith argues that in every single case of causation the cause gives rise to the effect but it's logically possible for that thing which happened to be the cause to occur without the effect. Therefore, yes, the universe needs a cause – that cannot be God because God is inconsistent with being able to cause anything.

*Dr. Craig:* I responded to that in our book that we did together, *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology*. I respond to that objection. I don't think it's a good objection at all because basically what it's saying is that it's impossible for God to be omnipotent. An omnipotent cause will infallibly produce the things that it wills to be. There's just no obvious incoherence in such a thing. I see absolutely no reason to think that you can't have an omnipotent being whose causal effects are infallibly produced and it's logically impossible for him not to produce those effects. So it's really just a denial of omnipotence, and there is no reason to think that that's a plausible denial.

*Student:* Wouldn't material cause also lack agency?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. Yes, that's a very good point. I think you're quite right. What he is saying is that the ultimate cause would need to have some sort of agency but material doesn't exhibit agency. Part of the argument that I give about the nature of the first cause is not

only that it's immaterial since it produced time and space, but I also argue that it had to be personal because of the need for agency. Apart from personal agency it's really hard to see how there could be a first cause that would bring the universe into being. Thank you. I think that that's a double line of confirmation or defense for the fact that we're not dealing here with just a material cause. It needs to be an efficient cause – an agent – and not just an impersonal material sort of thing.

## END DISCUSSION

Let's now turn from objections to *ex nihilo* to objections to the *creatio* part of the formula. These objections are just the opposite of the objections that we just looked at. They maintain that coming into being *ex nihilo* is easy. No cause is needed for the universe's beginning to exist. So these objections challenge the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*. They claim that things can come into being from nothing without any sort of cause. How might they defend this?

Consider this objection. If the universe began to exist then it must have come from nothing. But that's quite plausible since there are no constraints on nothing, and so nothing can do anything including producing the universe. Yes, this objection is really out there on the Internet. How might we respond to that? This objection, I think, is hopelessly confused about the use of the word “nothing.” Here I want to pick up on what we said in response to an earlier question. When it is rightly said that nothing preceded the universe, one doesn't mean that something preceded it and that was nothing. We mean that it was not preceded by anything. Taking these negative terms and reifying them has been the butt of jokes as old as Homer's story of the Cyclops and Odysseus when Odysseus tells the Cyclops his name is “No Man.” Imagine then the following dialogue between two people who are discussing the Second World War:

*Nothing stopped the German advance from sweeping across Belgium.*

*Oh, that's good. I'm glad it was stopped.*

*But they weren't stopped!*

*But you said nothing stopped them.*

*That's right.*

*So they were stopped.*

*No, nothing stopped them.*

*That's what I said – they were stopped, and it was nothing that stopped them.*

*No, no, no. I meant that they weren't stopped by anything.*

*Well, then, why didn't you say so in the first place?*

Here the objector in thinking of nothing seems to be guilty of reifying this term into an actual thing. Nothingness has no properties and no powers because it isn't even anything, and therefore it is wholly misconceived to say that it produced the universe. To say the universe was caused by nothing is to say that the universe had no cause. It wasn't caused by anything. That, I think, is metaphysically absurd, and that's why the causal principle (which is the first premise of the cosmological argument) is one of the oldest and most widely recognized truths of metaphysics.

Next objection: Quantum physics shows that things can come from nothing. Quantum physics proves that things can come from nothing. Lawrence Krauss, who is a prominent quantum physicist, in our debate in April of 2011 said the following,

In fact, one of the things about quantum mechanics is, nothing—not only can nothing become something, nothing always becomes something. Nothing is unstable. Nothing will always produce something in quantum mechanics. And if you apply quantum mechanics to gravity, you can show that it's possible that space and time themselves can come into existence when nothing existed before. So that's not a problem.<sup>12</sup>

How might we respond to this objection? Scientists who contend that physics can explain the origin of the universe from nothing seem to have an outrageously naive grasp of the English language. As I indicated, the term “nothing” is a term of universal negation. It is not a referring term. It's not a singular term. It means “not anything.” So, for example, if I say, *I had nothing for lunch today*, I mean I did not have anything for lunch today. If the theologian says that God created the universe from nothing, he means that God's creation of the universe was not out of anything. The word “nothing” is, to repeat, simply a term of universal negation meaning “not anything.” There's a whole series of similar words in English of universal negation. “Nobody” means “not anybody.” “None” means “not one.” “Nowhere” means “not anywhere.” “Never” means “not ever.” But because the word “nothing” is grammatically a pronoun we can use it as the subject or direct object of a sentence. By taking these words not as terms of universal negation but rather as words referring to something we can generate all kinds of funny situations. If you say, *I saw nobody in the hall*, the wiseacre says, *Oh yeah. He's been hanging around there a lot lately*. Or if you say, *I had nothing for lunch today*, the wiseacre says, *Really? How did it taste?* And as I mentioned, these sorts of jokes are as old as literature itself. In Homer's story of Odysseus, Odysseus introduces himself to the Cyclops as “Nobody.” One night Odysseus puts out the Cyclops' eye. His fellow Cyclopes hear him screaming in pain

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12 For a video of this debate see <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/videos/interviews-panels/craig-vs.-krauss-north-carolina-state-university/> specifically at the 38 minute, 43 second mark. A transcript of this debate can be found at <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/the-craig-krauss-debate-at-north-carolina-state-university/> (links accessed July 1, 2018).

and they yelled to him, *What's the matter with you, making so much noise that we can't sleep?* The Cyclops says, *Nobody is killing me! Nobody is killing me!* And they say, *If nobody is attacking you then you must be sick, and there's nothing we can do about it!*

In Euripides' version of the story, we have a sort of Abbott and Costello *Who's On First?* routine:

They say, *Why are you crying out, Cyclops?*

*Nobody has undone me!*

*Then there is no one hurting you after all.*

*Nobody is blinding me!*

*Then you're not blind.*

*As blind as you!*

*But how could nobody have made you blind?*

*You're mocking me. Where is this Nobody?*

*Nowhere, Cyclops!*

The use of these words like “nothing,” “nobody,” and so on as substantive terms referring to something is a joke. How astonishing then it is to find that some physicists whose native tongue is English have used these terms precisely as substantive terms referring to something. For example, Lawrence Krauss, again, has said with a straight face,

“There are a variety of forms of nothing . . . and they all have physical definitions.”<sup>13</sup>

“The laws of quantum mechanics tell us that nothing is unstable.”<sup>14</sup>

“70% [of] the dominant stuff in the universe is nothing.”<sup>15</sup>

“There's nothing there, but it has energy.”<sup>16</sup>

“Nothing weighs something.”<sup>17</sup>

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13 American Museum of Natural History, “2013 Isaac Asimov Memorial Debate: The Existence of Nothing.” YouTube. Flash Video File. <http://youtu.be/1OLz6uUuMp8?t=1h20m25s> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 1:20:25.

14 “Lawrence Krauss - Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing.” YouTube. Flash Video File. [http://youtu.be/u9Fi-BqS\\_Fw?t=26m17s](http://youtu.be/u9Fi-BqS_Fw?t=26m17s) (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 26:17.

15 Lawrence Krauss, Richard Fidler interview. May 23, 2013. See <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/05/23/3765778.htm> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 24:54.

16 Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, “Something From Nothing - a conversation w/ Richard Dawkins & Lawrence Krauss - ASU Feb 4, 2012.” YouTube. Flash Video file. <http://youtu.be/gH9UvnrARf8?t=37m19s> (accessed July 1, 2018) Quote is at 37:20

17 ANUChannel, “Richard Dawkins & Lawrence Krauss: Something from Nothing” YouTube. Flash Video file. <http://youtu.be/q0mljE9K-gY?t=18m59s> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 18:59.

“Nothing is almost everything.”<sup>18</sup>

All of those direct quotations and all of these claims take the word “nothing” to be a substantive or singular term referring to something such as the quantum vacuum or quantum mechanical fields. These are physical realities and therefore clearly something. To call these realities “nothing” is at least misleading, and it is guaranteed to confuse laypeople. At worst, it is a deliberate misrepresentation of science. Such statements do not even begin to address, much less answer, the question of why the universe exists rather than nothing.

I'll continue to share some more about this next time we meet. There's a devastating critique of Krauss's book, *A Universe From Nothing*, by David Albert that I want to share with you but we're out of time.<sup>19</sup>

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18 “Lawrence Krauss on the Universe Stockholm 2013.” YouTube. Flash video file. <https://youtu.be/68I4pnZha0k#t=46m38s> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 46:30.

19 Total Running Time: 34:55 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)

## Lecture 7: More Objections to *creatio ex nihilo*

We've been talking about objections to *creatio ex nihilo*, and we ended our time in our last lesson by looking at the objection that quantum physics can show that things can come into being from nothing and therefore no creation is needed in order for the universe to come into existence out of nothing. You'll recall I quoted Lawrence Krauss, a physicist, to this effect. He writes,

In fact, one of the things about quantum mechanics is, nothing—not only can nothing become something, nothing always becomes something. Nothing is unstable. Nothing will always produce something in quantum mechanics. And if you apply quantum mechanics to gravity, you can show that it's possible that space and time themselves can come into existence when nothing existed before. So that's not a problem.<sup>20</sup>

I explained that these sorts of claims mistakenly take the word “nothing” to be a singular term referring to something, for example the quantum vacuum or quantum mechanical fields. These are physical realities and therefore most emphatically not nothing. They are clearly something. Therefore, to call these realities nothing (as Krauss does) is at best misleading and at worst is a deliberate misrepresentation of science.

In his review of Krauss' book, *A Universe from Nothing*, David Albert, who is a very eminent philosopher of quantum physics, explains:

. . . quantum . . . states are particular arrangements of elementary physical stuff. . . . The fact that some arrangements of fields happen to correspond to the existence of particles and some don't is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that some of the possible arrangements of my fingers happen to correspond to the existence of a fist and some don't. And the fact that particles can pop in and out of existence, over time, as those fields rearrange themselves, is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that fists can pop in and out of existence . . . as my fingers rearrange themselves. And none of these poppings . . . amount to anything even remotely in the neighborhood of a creation from nothing.<sup>21</sup>

Albert concludes, “Krauss is dead wrong and his religious and philosophical critics are absolutely right.”

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20 For a video of this debate see <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/videos/interviews-panels/craig-vs.-krauss-north-carolina-state-university/> specifically at the 38 minute, 43 second mark. A transcript of this debate can be found at <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/the-craig-krauss-debate-at-north-carolina-state-university/> (links accessed July 1, 2018).

21 David Albert, “On the Origin of Everything,” critical notice of *A Universe from Nothing* by Lawrence Krauss, New York Times Sunday Book Review, March 23, 2012. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/books/review/a-universe-from-nothing-by-lawrence-m-krauss.html> (accessed July 17, 2018).

## START DISCUSSION

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, I'd be interested to hear what you, a quantum chemist at Georgia Tech, might have to say about this!

*Student:* I'll just second this rebuttal to Krauss' argument. In science you see these particles appearing and you think, *Gee, that's amazing! How do they appear out of nothing?* And then you quickly learn they didn't appear out of nothing; they appear out of this Dirac sea or whatever fields you're talking about for the particular particles. And then you say, *Oh, well, sure, OK, then it's perfectly fine.* And when they appear they have to obey all sorts of laws. They have to obey various conservation laws. So it's just part of physics. But none of it makes any sense until you understand that there is this quantum vacuum that they're coming out of, and then you learn the rules for that. It's absolutely not nothing.

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, and wouldn't you agree that not only do they obey laws subsequent to their coming into being but their very coming into existence is law-like?

*Student:* Yeah, exactly. The way they appear, absolutely. They obey certain laws of physics. It's not random or whatever. There are laws that govern all of this, and there are fields that govern all of this, and none of it could happen unless those were there.

*Dr. Craig:* I think the truth of the matter is that Krauss knows this. He knows it, but he is deliberately misrepresenting the situation so as to be provocative and sell his book and get people interested in cosmology.

*Student:* Another physics-based objection to Krauss – he talks about applying quantum physics to gravity. Well, the big problem in modern-day physics is you can't apply quantum physics to gravity. We don't have that theory yet. We don't understand . . . our current understanding, our relativistic understanding of gravity and quantum mechanics are mutually contradictory. We don't know how to apply quantum physics.

*Dr. Craig:* That's a very good point that I'm glad you brought out. Krauss represents a situation as though we have a quantum theory of gravity when in fact we don't. The entire edifice of modern physics is built on the twin pillars of general theory of relativity (which is a theory of gravity) and quantum mechanics (which is your subatomic physics). And as you say, unfortunately they're incompatible with each other. It is an open question yet how to blend or merge these together to have a completely unified physics. You're right. Krauss' conjectures here are way overblown scientifically besides being philosophically inept.

## END DISCUSSION

I'd like to go on now to a sixth objection which is a different proposal as to how the universe could come into being from literally nothing, and this proposal comes from the



very prominent astrophysicist and cosmologist Alex Vilenkin of Tufts University. Vilenkin has been persistent in arguing that the scientific evidence makes it virtually unavoidable that the universe began to exist. You can avoid the beginning of the universe but only at the expense of conjectures that are scientifically implausible and therefore do not provide a good model for the beginninglessness of the universe. The theorem that Vilenkin helped to craft that shows the beginning of the universe is called the Borde-Guth-Vilenkin theorem (for short, the BGV theorem). The Borde-Guth-Vilenkin theorem states that any universe which is, on average, in a state of cosmic expansion over its history cannot be infinite in the past but must reach a past space-time boundary.

Vilenkin, interestingly enough, is aware of the *kalam* cosmological argument. I have met Vilenkin and corresponded with him. He has actually interacted with the *kalam* argument in print. In response to the claim that the beginning of the universe requires a supernatural cause he says the following:

Regarding the BGV theorem and its relation to God, I think the theorem implies the existence of a rather special state at the past boundary of classical spacetime. Some mechanism is required to impose this state. Craig wants this mechanism to be God, but I think quantum cosmology would do just as well.<sup>22</sup>

So what is Vilenkin's proposal here? What does he have in mind when he says that quantum cosmology will do just as well in explaining the origin of the universe from nothing? Well, in an article published in the online magazine *Inference* in the fall of 2015 Vilenkin explains his proposal.<sup>23</sup> Vilenkin writes,

Modern physics can describe the emergence of the universe as a physical process that does not require a cause.

Nothing can be created from nothing, says Lucretius, if only because the conservation of energy makes it impossible to create nothing[sic?] from nothing.

Here I think he means to say “something.” I think this is a slip on Vilenkin’s part. The conservation of energy makes it impossible to create something from nothing. He cannot mean it makes it impossible to create nothing from nothing, because he’s just said from Lucretius that nothing can be created from nothing. So I feel quite certain that this was a slip of the pen here and what Vilenkin means to say is the conservation of energy makes it impossible to create something from nothing.

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22 Alexander Vilenkin to Alan Guth, March 20, 2017. I am grateful to Daniel Came for sharing with me this correspondence, in which Vilenkin strongly rejects Guth’s claim of a beginningless universe on the basis of time-reversal models.

23 Alexander Vilenkin, “The Beginning of the Universe,” *Inference: International Review of Science* 1/ 4 (Oct. 23, 2015), <http://inference-review.com/article/the-beginning-of-the-universe> (accessed July 17, 2018).

Now, what is he talking about here? Well, he says in the first sentence that modern physics can explain the origin of the universe in such a way that the beginning of the universe doesn't require a cause, and then he quotes the ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius. Lucretius was a Roman philosopher who lived during the first century before Christ. He wrote a book called *De Rerum Natura – On the Nature of Things*. In *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius argued that it's impossible for something to be created from nothing. Vilenkin accurately quotes Lucretius in the second sentence – “nothing can be created from nothing” and by the word “nothing” here Lucretius is using the word properly. He is not using it the way Krauss did as a singular term referring to something. What Lucretius meant is that it's impossible for anything to be created from nothing so that nothing at all (not anything) can be created from nothing according to Lucretius. And then Vilenkin gives (obviously not Lucretius') a reason for thinking this, but appeals to the modern law of the conservation of energy which says that energy can be neither created nor destroyed; that in every process the energy is conserved and therefore energy cannot be created or destroyed. Vilenkin says the conservation of energy would make it impossible to create something from nothing because then you would have energy created which is impossible according to the conservation of energy. So the opening paragraph gives the argument as to why there needs to be a cause for the beginning of the universe. The reason ostensibly is that something cannot be created from nothing because that would violate the conservation of energy, and therefore you need to have a cause which would create the universe.

Now in the second paragraph Vilenkin goes on to say there's a loophole in this reasoning. He's going to dispute Lucretius' argument, and this is what he has to say:

There is a loophole in this reasoning. The energy of the gravitational field is negative; it is conceivable that this negative energy could compensate for the positive energy of matter, making the total energy of the cosmos equal to zero.

So what he's saying is that the energy that's associated with the gravitational field is negative energy whereas the energy that's associated with matter is positive energy, and it's possible that these two cancel each other out exactly with no leftover – that the positive and negative energy exactly cancel each other out so that on balance the total energy of the universe is zero. Then he goes on to say,

In fact, this is precisely what happens in a closed universe, in which the space closes on itself, like the surface of a sphere.

What he has in mind here would be a closed space like the surface of a sphere. This spherical surface is finite, and if the universe is like that (if the universe is like the surface of a sphere – the three-dimensional analogy to the two-dimensional surface of a sphere)

then he says the total energy has to be zero. This is exactly what happens in such a closed universe in which the universe or space is like the surface of a sphere. He says,

It follows from the laws of general relativity that the total energy of such a universe is necessarily equal to zero. . . .

So if our universe is not open geometrically (if it's closed geometrically like the surface of a sphere, which is finite) then he says necessarily general relativity requires that the positive and negative energy balance each other out and so the total energy of the universe is zero. Alright. What's the implication of that? Well, the third paragraph:

If all the conserved numbers of a closed universe are equal to zero, then there is nothing to prevent such a universe from being spontaneously created out of nothing.

It wouldn't violate the conservation laws because the total energy of the universe is zero and so he says that there would be nothing to prevent the universe from popping into being from nothing.

Then he goes on to say,

And according to quantum mechanics, any process which is not strictly forbidden by the conservation laws will happen with some probability. . . .

However remote, given the laws of quantum mechanics, any process or event that is not ruled out (that is not forbidden by these conservation laws) will happen sooner or later.

So he concludes,

What causes the universe to pop out of nothing? No cause is needed.

It just happens.

Well, now, I think this is a terrible argument. Let's grant for the sake of argument the supposition that the positive energy associated with matter is exactly counter balanced by the negative energy associated with gravity so that on balance the total energy of the universe is zero. We'll grant that for the sake of argument. Vilenkin's key move comes with the claim that in such a case, "There is nothing to prevent such a universe from being spontaneously created out of nothing." Now think about that. There is nothing to *prevent* such a universe from being spontaneously created out of nothing. This claim is a triviality. Necessarily, if there is nothing then there is nothing to prevent the universe from coming into being. By the same token, if there is nothing then there is nothing to *permit* the universe to come into being from nothing. If there were anything to prevent or to permit the universe's coming into being then there would be something, not nothing. If there is nothing then there is nothing, period. As our British friends would say: full-stop. But the whole argument is misconceived in the sense of saying that in order for the

universe to originate out of nothing – to be metaphysically impossible – there needs to be something to prevent it which is simply wrong. The absence of anything to prevent the universe's coming into being doesn't imply the metaphysical possibility of the universe's coming into being from nothing.

To give an illustration. If there were nothing then there would be nothing to prevent God's coming into being without a cause. Right? If there were nothing then there would be nothing to prevent God's coming into being without a cause. But that doesn't entail that such a thing is metaphysically possible. It's metaphysically impossible for God to come into being. It is necessarily true that God cannot come into being with or without a cause even if there were nothing to prevent this because nothing exists. Vilenkin, however, infers, "No cause is needed for the universe's coming into being because the conservation laws would not prevent it." According to quantum mechanics, any process which is not strictly forbidden by the conservation laws will happen.

His argument here assumes that if there were nothing then both the conservation laws and quantum physical laws would still hold. If you think about it, that's far from obvious. In the absence of anything at all it's not clear why the laws governing our universe would hold. Why would the conservation laws and the quantum mechanical laws be valid if there were truly nothing? But in any case, why think that, given the laws of quantum mechanics, anything not strictly forbidden by the conservation laws will inevitably happen? For example, the conservation laws do not strictly forbid God's sending everybody to heaven. But I don't think that gives great grounds for optimism about people's salvation. Neither do the laws forbid God's sending everybody to hell, in which case both outcomes will occur. That's logically impossible because they are logically contrary universal generalizations. It cannot both be the case that everybody goes to heaven and everybody goes to hell, and yet neither of these is strictly forbidden by the conservation laws and so they should both happen. We can make the same point non-theologically as well. The conservation laws do not strictly forbid something's coming into existence but neither do they forbid nothing's coming into existence. But both cannot happen. It's logically absurd to think that because something is not forbidden by the conservation laws it will therefore inevitably happen.

Finally, Vilenkin's inference that because the positive and the negative energy in the universe sum to zero therefore no cause of the universe's coming into being is needed is difficult to take seriously. This is like saying that if your debts exactly balance your assets then your net worth is zero and therefore there need be no cause of your financial situation. Vilenkin would, I hope, not agree with Peter Atkins that because the positive and negative energy of the universe sum to zero therefore nothing exists now and so to

quote Atkins, “Nothing did indeed come from nothing”<sup>24</sup> because nothing exists according to Atkins. As Descartes has taught us, I, at least, undeniably exist and so something exists. Christopher Isham, who is Great Britain's premier quantum cosmologist, has pointed out that even if the positive and negative energy of the universe sum to zero there still needs to be what he calls “ontic seeding” in order to create the positive and negative energy in the first place even if on balance its sum is zero.<sup>25</sup> Even if we were to concede that the material cause of the universe is not needed, the need for an efficient cause of the universe, I think, is patent.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* This is a little bit of a clarification for the scientifically not-so-astute like myself. When we're talking about the energy of matter in this discussion it seems to me like that would be something rather than nothing. Is that not true?

*Dr. Craig:* It's a sort of mathematical trick that he's talking about. Think of my analogy of your assets and debits. If your assets and debits exactly balance then your net worth is zero. But does that mean that you have no money in your wallet? No. It's just your debts cancel it out. Similarly, of course the positive energy is something and the negative energy is something even if on balance the sum of them is zero. So I think that's why Isham is quite right in saying even if they do sum to zero (for example, in a closed universe) there's got to be some cause of the positive and negative energy in the first place. To me, that is just patent.

*Student:* My big question is this: does all this mean that God is required to follow the laws of this universe or can he do things arbitrarily that he wants to do? When Lazarus came out of the grave, that was something that didn't fit any physics.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. Clearly, God transcends the laws of nature and could have created a universe with a different set of laws of nature. And when he does miracles, he does things that are beyond the causal capacity of nature. So those of us who believe in a transcendent creator of the universe do not believe that God is bound by the laws of nature. So I don't think Vilenkin's argument is an argument to say that God could not cause the universe. I think his argument should be interpreted more defensively. He's not arguing against God. What he's arguing is that you don't need God; that you can get something from nothing and therefore you don't need a creator. This is very similar to Stephen Hawking's statement, “What need then for a creator?” Contrary to popular impression, Hawking is not arguing against God. He's not arguing for atheism. He's just

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24 From our debate posted at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/debate-transcript-what-is-the-evidence-for-against-the-existence-of-god> (accessed July 17, 2018); cf. Peter Atkins, *Creation Revisited* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1992).

25 Christopher Isham, “Quantum Cosmology and the Origin of the Universe,” lecture presented at the conference “Cosmos and Creation,” Cambridge University, 14 July 1994.

questioning what need is there for a creator if quantum physics can explain the origin of the universe from nothing. What I'm suggesting is that, when you look at it carefully, Vilenkin's argument is really a terrible argument that goes wrong at several points.

## **END DISCUSSION**

That brings us to the end of today's lesson and our discussion of objections to *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>26</sup>

## Lecture 8: Continuing Conservation

God is conceived in traditional Christian theology to be the cause of the world not only in his initial act of bringing the world into existence or creating the world but also in his ongoing conservation of the world in being. So today we want to turn to the subject of continuing creation, as it's sometimes called. Let's begin by looking at some biblical data concerning continuing creation.

While divine conservation is not as well attested biblically as creation (which is distinguished by the consistent use of past tense verbs to indicate an action at the beginning of the universe when God brought the world into being), nevertheless there are some important New Testament passages that speak of God's conservation of the creation in being. For example, Colossians 1:16-17. Here Paul says of Christ,

for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Notice the contrasting verbs in that sentence – between verbs of creation (*all things were created through Christ and for Christ*), but then in addition to that *all things hold together in him*. The one verb speaks of the creation of the universe initially; the other speaks of God's ongoing preservation of the world in being. The word literally means to con-sist – the world consists in God.

Similarly in the book of Hebrews 1:3, again speaking of Christ, “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.” The word there translated “upholding” literally means to carry. God carries or sustains, as it were, the universe in existence.

Finally, in Acts 17:28 we have the words of the apostle Paul as he speaks to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill. Paul says, “In him we live and move and have our being.” It's that third verb there that I draw your attention to – we live and move and we have our being in God. The word literally means we exist in God.

So there is New Testament data that God not only created the universe initially but that the universe consists or is sustained by God, that God bears or sustains the universe, and that we exist in God.

### START DISCUSSION

*Student:* I just noticed with the two passages that you quoted they emphasize in human hierarchy or ruling instead of . . . I think it's almost like . . . it says all things in heaven



and earth, power, rulers, and authorities, and instead of creation in material. So it's almost like God entrusts us to rule according to his empowerment.

*Dr. Craig:* I think the question of the identity of the thrones or dominions or powers and authorities that Paul is talking about there – whether they are earthly powers or spiritual dominions – is an open question. I think he's probably talking about spiritual dominions here. I think, for example, of Ephesians 6:12, “For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” I think what Paul is saying in Colossians is that even these invisible realms – these spiritual authorities and so forth – are sustained in being by Christ. Not just the physical world. That would be impressive. But as Paul says: all things, visible and invisible. These, I think, invisible dominions refer to these angelic or spiritual dominions.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's go on then to a systematic summary of what is meant by conservation. Creation and conservation have traditionally been classed as two subdivisions of *creatio ex nihilo* because in neither case does God create or conserve the world out of some material thing. The initial creation is very often called *creatio originans*, or originating creation. This would be God's creation at the beginning of the world. Conservation is called *creatio continuans* or continuing creation. That would be God's ongoing conservation of the world in existence.

While this is a very nice and handy rubric, nevertheless I think that when it's pressed for technical precision that it is actually quite misleading. As we've seen, when we say that something is created we are talking about the first time at which a thing comes into existence. So the doctrine of creation implies that things begin to exist at the time that they are created. But then if you think of conservation as a kind of continuing creation, what that would imply is that at every successive moment God creates a new individual at that moment – the first time at which it exists in the place of the thing that existed at the previous time. Thereby you are landed in the crazy doctrine called occasionalism. Occasionalism is the view that God is the only cause in reality. Things that we think are causally connected are merely the occasions upon which God acts to bring about some new effect. So, for example, when you see a wad of cotton exposed to a flame and it turns black and smoldering, on this view the flame does not actually cause the cotton to turn black and smoldering. Rather, the proximity of the flame to the cotton is merely the occasion upon which God makes the cotton black and smoldering. So there really are no secondary causes in the world. God is the only cause there is, and he simply acts on certain occasions to bring about different effects. What occasionalism implies is that nobody persists through time. You never persist from one moment to another. There is a

new creation at every successive moment, and therefore this destroys personal identity and hence personal agency and responsibility. The costs of construing conservation as a type of creation I think are unacceptably high.

If we try to elude this problem by saying *creation doesn't necessarily involve a first time at which something begins to exist* then I think we've really lost something important and essential to the doctrine of creation. As I explained in our lectures on creation, creation involves God's bringing something into being where something comes into being at a time T if that time is the first time at which that thing exists. So I think it's preferable not to classify conservation as a type of creation. It's really quite a distinct operation of God in addition to *creatio ex nihilo* – conservation.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* I was just curious as to what theologians came up with this? Maybe Calvin?

*Dr. Craig:* One might think so, but actually it's Islamic medieval Muslim theologians who wanted Allah to be the absolute and only cause in the universe were occasionalists. It was also adopted by a French philosopher who lived, I think, in the 16th century named Nicolas Malebranche. So in Western philosophy Malebranche would be the primary figure that would be identified with occasionalism, but it was characteristic of medieval Muslim thought because it would exalt Allah as being the only cause of anything that happens.

*Student:* Is this in direct opposition to the watchmaker where God creates the world and then he just steps back and lets it run by itself? Then technically under that you don't need God anymore – he just needs to start things and then it'll run on its own, whereas this is basically saying if God stepped away from his creation or he ceased to exist then so would everything he created.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, I think it is the exact opposite of what you've just described, which is deism. Deism is this sort of absentee God who is responsible for creation of the universe and you might even say conservation I think (I'm not sure that deists would deny conservation), but they certainly don't think that God is active in the world, whereas the occasionalist says that everything that happens in the world is caused by God and God alone – there are no secondary causes.

*Student:* I wonder how this relates to the tensed theory or nontensed theory of time. It seems that the B-theory (the nontensed) has everything in existence past, present, and future, whereas this has things coming into being constantly. How does that relate?

*Dr. Craig:* I think that you could be an occasionalist on either theory of time. What you would simply deny is that if you think of events in time like these (say one, two, three, and four) you would simply deny that there is any causal connection between these

events. Rather, God would be the only source of all of the events, and you would not have any causal connection among the events themselves. I think you could hold that on either a tensed theory or a B-theory of time. It would just deny that there is any internal causal connection between these secondary causes.

*Student:* You said that creation is distinct from this in terms of . . . in what way?

*Dr. Craig:* That creation, I think, involves something's coming to being at the first time of its existence, whereas conservation doesn't imply that there is a first time at which the thing exists. God could conserve something in being without a beginning or an end so that conservation doesn't have this notion of a beginning of existence that I think is really essential to creation. Is that clear? As I'll say in a moment, God's action in creation and conservation is the same: it is the bestowal of being. It is the giving of existence. Creation and conservation don't differ from each other with respect to God's action. They will differ from each other with respect to the object of that action, as I'll explain in a moment. In creation, the object comes into being, whereas in conservation there doesn't need to be a first moment of existence.

*Student:* What would an occasionalist say on the nature of the human soul? If the world is being created every instant, does that basically mean that there's an infinite number of copies of me and my soul that are going to exist throughout eternity?

*Dr. Craig:* It would seem to imply that, yes. You could just keep dividing any temporal interval into more and more brief slices, and unless time is composed of little discrete atoms then that process could go on forever. So between any two moments of time there would be an infinite number of slices and hence an infinite number of persons in between those two times. That's why, as I say, this destroys the idea of personal identity over time.

*Student:* You mentioned as believing in conservation that there doesn't require creation. But if that were the case . . . something that was conserved would be co-eternal with God if there was no beginning.

*Dr. Craig:* That's a good point. Do you see what he is saying? If God only conserves the universe in being and never creates it then that would imply that the universe is co-eternal with God in the sense that God never exists alone. Because if it did have a beginning then there would be a moment at which it is created. So a good many theologians who are very reluctant to say anything that might intersect with empirical science lest theology be falsified only affirm a doctrine of conservation of the world in being. I would say among your non-evangelical theologians the doctrine of creation is very, very frequently reduced to conservation – that God sustains the world in being moment by moment.

**END DISCUSSION**

As I say, we can distinguish conservation from creation not in terms of a difference in God's action or power (which seems to be the same), but rather in terms of the object of his action. For conservation presupposes a subject which God acts upon to cause it to persist from one moment to another. Creation does not presuppose any such object. Rather, in creation the object is constituted by God's action – it comes into being. It is an absolute beginning of existence for that thing. But in conservation there is a subject on which God acts to cause it to persevere to the next moment. So conservation should be understood, I think, in terms of God's preserving some entity E from one moment of existence to another. We can provide this analysis of divine conservation:

God conserves E (where E is any entity that you want to pick) if and only if God acts upon E to bring about E's existing from time T until some later time T' which is later than T through every subinterval of T to T'.

So the divine action itself (that is to say the bestowal of being – the causing of existence) may be the same in both creation and conservation, but in creation it does not presuppose a prior object. And it may be instantaneous simply at a time T, whereas in conservation it does presuppose a prior object and it occurs over an interval of time. So that would be the difference between creation and conservation. Creation doesn't presuppose the existence of an object, but rather it constitutes that object in being. And it can occur in an instant T. But in conservation God acts upon an object to cause it to exist through an interval of time – from one time to the next.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* We seem to be talking about physical entities. But what about the soul? When does that begin, and can it be destroyed? Does God allow it to be destroyed, or is it, you know, we go to heaven or hell?

*Dr. Craig:* This wouldn't be restricted to physical entities. This would apply to angels or souls or any other kind of spiritual realities that you might want to postulate. God would not only create those things initially – bring them into being, *creatio ex nihilo* – but then he would sustain them in being from one moment to the next. So angels will not continue to exist from one moment to another without the upholding conserving power of God.

*Student:* Along that same lines, I have heard people try to equate God's conservation with physical forces – specifically the strong nuclear force – saying that God is physically holding the protons together within the nucleus. If he were to withhold that then everything would cease to exist.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that that is a case of the very bad strategy of God-of-the-gaps where you don't understand what holds the atomic nucleus together despite the repulsion of the protons from one another and so you say God holds them together, God is the strong

nuclear force. I think that that is postulating God just as a plug in some supposed gap in scientific knowledge, and that's a mistake. As I said earlier, conservation would apply to non-physical entities like angels and demons and things as well . . . souls. It's not restricted just to things composed of matter.

*Student:* And not just holding them together, but actually their actual existence as well.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. Their being. That's a good point because the other things could still fall apart but the particles would still exist, and here we're talking about sustaining something in being.

*Student:* I just want to make sure I have distilled this to its simplest form for my simple brain. Conservation means God sustains, not creates, a thing across intervals of time. Creation – God causes a thing; conservation – God sustains a thing.

*Dr. Craig:* Not exactly. Both of these are causal relations, so you can't say in creation God causes something but in conservation he sustains it. They're both causation. Rather what you want to say is that in creation God brings it into being at a first time of its existence. He constitutes it in being. The difference with conservation would be (as someone else pointed out) it doesn't presuppose a beginning of existence. It could go back forever and at every moment be sustained and held in being by God.

*Student:* The first question I want to ask is: do they believe in free will?

*Dr. Craig:* Who is they?

*Student:* Those people who are claiming this conservation.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, you are not speaking of the occasionalists then?

*Student:* People who are claiming those ideas. Do they believe that there's free will?

*Dr. Craig:* OK, again, I'm not sure whom you mean by “those” in your question. Let me clarify. The occasionalists do not believe in free will. Everything is determined by Allah for the Muslim occasionalists. There is no secondary causes. You don't do anything; you don't bring about anything. For those who believe in the doctrine of conservation such as I've explicated here, certainly many do believe in free will. Roman Catholics believe in free will. Calvinists, I think, don't believe in libertarian free will, but it's not because of their doctrine of conservation. It would be because of their doctrine of divine providence – they want to believe that God unilaterally determines everything that happens. So there's no connection between conservation properly explained and freedom of the will. It's neutral with respect to that.

*Student:* But if God is the one who decides everything then what is the use of free will?

*Dr. Craig:* On conservation it doesn't say that God decides everything. You're confusing conservation with determinism. This is just saying that God keeps something in being as long as it exists. Maybe an analogy would be helpful here. Imagine that I'm a magician and I can just say *poof* and a ball pops into existence. That would be creating the ball. But suppose I take a ball in my hand and I keep it in existence over a period of time. That would be conservation. I'm upholding the ball in existence. Someone who walked into the room and saw me holding the ball wouldn't know whether I began to do so a few minutes ago, ten years ago, or whether or not (if I were divine) I was upholding the ball from eternity. That illustration might help you to grasp the difference between creating something and conserving it.

*Student:* I'm having a difficulty with the idea that something can exist from eternity past but still be a caused thing in the sense of you're saying that on conservationism there is still a causal relationship. But if something has potentially existed alongside God for eternity then is that not like just an abstract object that God did not create that is just there?

*Dr. Craig:* That forms a wonderful segue to the next paragraph in my lecture which I'm not going to have time to give this morning! So we'll have to talk about it next week. I think that there's a different category that has been overlooked by theologians that would be applicable to God's relationship to any abstract objects that you might want to postulate like numbers, sets, and other mathematical objects. What I'll argue is that they cannot be thought to be conserved in being because these things exist timelessly. They don't exist from time  $T$  to  $T'$ , and therefore conservation wouldn't be applicable to them any more than creation. There has to be a third category that would apply to how God sustains in being timeless objects like mathematical entities. We'll talk about that next week.<sup>27</sup>

## Lecture 9: Divine Concurrence

In our last lesson we differentiated carefully between creation and conservation. Creation is the act of God whereby he first brings something into existence. Conservation is the act of God whereby he keeps something in existence from moment to moment.

I argued that the notion of creation inherently involves the idea of a tensed theory of time – sometimes called the A-theory of time – according to which temporal becoming is an objective and real feature of the world. Things really do come into being and go out of being as time passes. By contrast, on the tenseless view of time, time is stretched out like a line and all times (whether past, present, and future to us) are equally real. I said you could compare this B-theory of time to a bologna which is stretched out and can be sliced into temporal slices, and all of these parts are equally real. The whole four-dimensional bologna simply exists tenselessly and things that are in time are located at different slices of this four-dimensional object. So on a B-theory – or tenseless theory – of time the universe never really comes into being. It just has a front edge – a first slice – but it never really comes into existence as a whole. It's as eternal as God is. It would exist timelessly along with God who is outside the four-dimensional spacetime manifold and would be causally operative and connected to everything in it. I argued that a serious biblical doctrine of creation involves a tensed theory of time whereby things come into being and go out of being and is therefore incompatible with this tenseless, or B-theory, of time.

What about conservation? Is it compatible with a B-theory of time? Well, at first blush I think you would say that conservation is compatible with a B-theory of time. It just co-exists along with God, and God is causally related to every part in it. When you reflect on this, however, I think you can see very quickly that this construal would prove to be problematic. Because on the B-theory of time these slices do not endure through time from one moment to the next. Rather, each one is fixed and immovable, so to speak, at its temporal coordinate, and therefore God does not preserve anything through time. Rather, they're just different slices at different times, and those slices are not the same thing.

They are different parts which simply exist tenselessly at their temporal coordinates. Moreover, on this theory of time this whole four-dimensional object never comes into being or goes out of being. It just exists alongside of God and therefore isn't preserved over time. Time is an internal dimension of this object, but the object itself doesn't exist over time. Therefore, it seems to me that the very idea of conservation implies a tensed, or A-theory, of time. The conservation of an entity over time is necessary if and only if an A-theory of time is true so that it endures from one moment to another and in the absence of God's conservation would lapse into being. But on a B-theory of time nothing endures from one moment to another, and neither is it possible for something to lapse into non-existence. Everything just exists at its temporal station. So it seems to me that on the



B-theory of time you cannot properly speak of God's conservation either of the world or of things in the world.

This is paradoxical because on a tenseless view of time God is in some sense causing the universe to exist. It is dependent upon him for its being; in some sense then he sustains it. Similarly, if we allow into our ontology (or our view of what exists) timeless entities (say numbers or sets or other mathematical objects), these things exist outside of time and therefore are not conserved in being by God. They do not endure from one moment of time to another because they're simply timeless. Nevertheless, if there were such entities they would have to depend upon God for their being. They cannot exist independently of God. So there is something like conservation or preservation of them in existence but it isn't, properly speaking, conservation because they wouldn't be conserved from one moment to another.

The existence of these sorts of entities seems to require a third category that has been overlooked by classical theology – a sort of static or changeless creation which would be also appropriate to a tenseless theory of time such as we have illustrated on the whiteboard. I want to use the name “sustenance” for this peculiar relation. That's a term of my own invention here. It's not creation; it's not conservation. It's sustenance.

We can define this in the following way.

1. God sustains some entity E if and only if E exists tenselessly at some time T, or E exists timelessly.

and

2. God brings it about that E exists.

According to our analysis, God sustains some event or entity E if and only if E exists tenselessly at a time T or E exists timelessly, and God brings it about that E exists.

This would be, I think, the appropriate way to speak of the dependence of either timeless abstract objects upon God or it would also be the appropriate way to speak of the dependence of the four-dimensional universe as a whole or of its temporal slices on God if a B-theory of time is true. So if one does embrace a B-theory of time, it seems to me that while God doesn't conserve things in existence we can say that he sustains them in existence given this analysis.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* In that case, when did God create abstract objects? Or have they always been sustained as part of God's existence?

*Dr. Craig:* Well, they wouldn't necessarily need to be part of God's existence. This is controversial, right? There's a multiplicity of views. But one view would be that these

entities just exist co-eternally with God. They're not the same as God. God is a living concrete entity, and these abstract entities like numbers and sets exist alongside of him, but they don't exist independently of him. They're sustained in being by God timelessly.

*Student:* So they were like necessary precursors to creation?

*Dr. Craig:* They would be precursors to physical creation, yes. Because, for example, if God were to create one horse there would already be ("already" in a non-temporal sense) the number 1 in order for there to be one horse. The number 1 has to exist on this view. As you probably may remember from our discussion of divine aseity, I'm an anti-realist about these things personally. I don't think they exist. But this is an open question and it's not one on which Christianity stands or falls. Some people, like my colleague J. P. Moreland for example, believes that these sort of abstract entities exist and depend upon God for their existence. So I think the proper relationship of God to these entities would be sustenance. He sustains them in being even though he doesn't create them or conserves them.

*Student:* I'm not sure I understand the difference between bringing it about that something exists and creating something.

*Dr. Craig:* The expression "bringing it about" is meant to be neutral here. We could substitute something like "causes for it." God causes E to exist, but it doesn't necessarily imply the idea of a beginning of existence which is what's entailed in creation, I'm arguing. I'm maintaining that creation involves this idea of something's coming into being, and then I gave an explanation of what it is to come into being. God can cause E to exist without E's coming into being. There doesn't have to be a first moment of its existence, as we were just saying earlier.

*Student:* Can we say these things are held in existence and conceptually and symbolically in the mind of God just like numbers 1 and 2? The concept of oneness and twoness. Because these things only really have value for us in the physical world so something we can use as a representation.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, as I said there's a multiplicity of different views on this, and I was taking in response to the earlier question the strongest view which is called Platonism. Plato believed that these abstract objects exist independently of us, independently of the world. In fact, for Plato these entities are more real than the physical world. He said the physical world and the things in it are like shadows compared to these abstract mathematical and geometrical objects. But as you pointed out, there is a wide range of weaker views that are not as robust as Plato's view. The church fathers and medievals tended to think of these objects as ideas in the mind of God. They took Plato's realm of the Forms and they moved them into the mind of God as ideas of God. So the number 1, the set of natural numbers, and things of this sort are thoughts in God's mind, not independently existing

objects. Then there are other views as well that would say that these are merely pretense. They're like make-believe. We're invited to imagine that they exist and then can explore the logical consequences. There's many, many different views of these. But what I'm simply saying is that if you do believe that these sorts of things exist, they cannot exist independently of God. There has to be some kind of dependence relation. That's what I think sustenance gives you, and sustenance is not only applicable to these entities that exist timelessly but sustenance would also apply to things that exist tenselessly at moments of time. So sustenance would apply both to the B-theory of time as well as to any of these abstract timeless objects you might want to have.

*Student:* Let me try to explain my question. If you extend a point, it will become a line. And if you extend a line, it's a plane. And if you extend a plane, it becomes a cube – three dimensions. If you extend that then time comes in. That is, if we take it purely empirical – like it's static – and yet because the time creates the changes which we may say intervention of God or intervention of people that the plan grows or things move. The planets rotate or something. So that change – that is an additional force or energy interjected into this empirical extension. So I was just thinking – when you talk about God's sustenance, that's on top of this empirical extension. There are acts of intervention coming in.

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, yes. Yes, OK. I thought you were going to go in an entirely different direction! But certainly in addition to sustaining the universe in being or conserving it in being there will be special acts of God whereby he intervenes in the series of secondary causes. This is what we'll talk about under divine providence, which is the next section. After we complete our lesson today, God willing, we'll talk about divine providence next week.

*Student:* I'm new to the class, and I'm trying to make this very simple so that I can understand it. Would I be wrong in saying that these abstract, timeless objects that are existing outside of time are really the context that we look at as laws of mathematics, natural laws, the sort of the context or the constructs that God used in order to put order and structure into his creation?

*Dr. Craig:* No, but it's close. The number 1, for example, is not a law. Right? The number 1 is just an object. The set of natural numbers is not a law. But the natural laws that govern our universe can be given mathematical formulations so that the laws of nature can be exhibited as mathematical equations or mathematical formulae, and if those exist then you're right they would exist as abstract objects just as much as numbers and sets and functions and other sorts of things. The laws of nature on this view would be these mathematical propositions or formulae.

**END DISCUSSION**

Let me move on to our next section. We've been talking about conservation – God's preserving the universe in being over time from one moment to another. This was typically thought to be part of continuing creation, as you may remember, though I criticized that classification. But there was another part of continuing creation in addition to conservation. There is what is called divine concurrence, or in Latin *concursum*. So in addition to *conservatio* you had *concursum*, or in English translation “concurrence.”

According to the doctrine of concurrence, God is the cause of everything that happens in the world. That is not to say that God is the only cause – that would be occasionalism which we talked about last time. Rather, according to concurrence, God concurs with the action of the secondary causes to produce their effects, and in the absence of God's concurrence these secondary causes would be powerless to produce any effects. They would not cause anything. The secondary causes are effective only because God concurs with their operation to produce their effects.

This doctrine was applied by medieval theologians to explain certain biblical miracles. For example, you all remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were thrown by King Nebuchadnezzar into that smelting furnace to be incinerated. But instead of perishing in the flames, they were walking around inside the furnace unharmed. These medieval theologians explained this miracle by saying it is not that there was a change in the body of the three children of Israel – it's not that they became like asbestos or some incombustible material. Rather, what God did was he withdrew his concurrence with the flames so that they could not produce their effect and burn up the children of Israel. The children of Israel remained ordinary non-supernatural human flesh and blood, but they were not harmed by the flames because God withdrew his concurrence with the secondary causes so that the effect of burning and charring would not be produced. That would be a vivid illustration of how concurrence works in the world with secondary causes.

One might ask: how does this relate to human free will and determinism? Here we have a difference of opinion between the disciples of Thomas Aquinas and Luis Molina on this question. Aquinas maintained that God acts on the secondary causes to make them produce their effects. So when it comes to the human will, God causes the human will to choose A rather than not-A. God's concurrence acts on the secondary causes to make them produce their effects. Molina, by contrast, championed what he called simultaneous concurrence. That is to say, God acts with the secondary causes to produce their effect. He doesn't act on the secondary cause to make it do something; rather, he acts with the secondary cause to produce its effect. He compares concurrence to two men pulling a boat up onto the shore with two ropes. Each one is pulling the boat on his own rope, but together the effect of the boat being lifted onto the shore is produced. It is not that one man acts on the other man who then pulls on the boat. It's not like a chain. Rather these

are two simultaneous causal actions that unite to produce the common effect. Molina, by holding to simultaneous concurrence, maintains that he is able to preserve human free will because, unlike Thomas Aquinas' view, God doesn't move the human will to choose this or that. Rather, God simply acts with the human will to produce in being what the human will freely chooses. The followers of Molina thought that Aquinas' view led to determinism and the denial of free will, but Molina's doctrine of simultaneous concurrence allows Molina to say that God is the cause of everything that happens but that this is perfectly consistent with human freedom because he acts with the secondary cause to produce the effect, not on the secondary cause to produce the effect.

This is a remarkable doctrine, I'm sure you'll agree. I doubt that probably anyone in this class has even heard of concurrence before. It has been almost totally eclipsed in contemporary theology in discussions of the relation between God and the world. This is ironic because it seems to follow from divine conservation which is the only doctrine of creation that most theologians are willing to embrace today. Just think about it. If God conserves in being some entity E from T to T' (which is a later time than T) then he has to conserve E not just in abstraction but he has to conserve E in its concrete particularity with all of its properties. To give an example. Suppose that the entity E here is a wad of cotton, and suppose that at time T the cotton is brought into proximity with a flame so that the cotton then becomes smoldering and black at T'. It goes from being white and fluffy at T to being black and smoldering at T'. God must not merely conserve E from T to T', he has to conserve that piece of cotton in all of its particularity. For the cotton to exist from T to T', God has to preserve it as a white fluffy piece of cotton at first and then as a black and smoldering piece of cotton. Therefore, in conserving it with all of its properties, conservation requires that God concur with the cotton's being white at T and being black at T'. So concurrence actually seems to follow from the doctrine of conservation which is ironic, as I say, given the fact that most theologians who want a doctrine of creation will agree to conservation, but concurrence never seems to enter the picture.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* If God produces . . . if God acts on or in some sense causes everything, then how would we . . . it seems like we would want to avoid saying that if somebody shoots an innocent person that God in some sense killed that person. How would you avoid saying that? Because you want to avoid saying that God is the cause of evil, but at the same time it seems that if he causes everything he at least causes the negative effects.

*Dr. Craig:* This is a very good question. Obviously, God conserves in being the terrorist and the knife in the terrorist's hand and the knife as it plunges into his victim. On concurrence, God concurs with these secondary causes in producing their effect. That's

true. But Molina would say that God is not responsible for the evil of that act because the evil lies not in the physical state of affairs itself. The evil lies in the intention of the agent who carries it out. I think that's right. Plunging a knife into a person's body is not in and of itself morally evil. A surgeon might do that, or someone might do that to protect someone else. The physical state of affairs is really morally neutral. Evil is ascribed to the intentions and the motives of the agent who carries it out. In cases of evil acts, God merely permits the secondary agents to carry out their evil actions and he concurs with their effects, but he does not intend them as they do. God's permission of the event is done only because he knows that ultimately permitting this will allow for his purposes to be achieved. I think Molina has a good answer to this in saying that God can be the physical cause of everything that happens without being morally responsible for evil actions.

*Student:* I just wanted to follow up on the question that was just asked. Shouldn't we take that all the way back to the beginning? And, if you don't mind, could we maybe briefly go over supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism again? Because that goes all the way back to the beginning of creation. Correct?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. Say Eve commits the first sin. God would concur in allowing them to do that. He wouldn't make the fruit turn hard and brittle so that she couldn't bite into it, or he wouldn't make the tree disappear. God concurs with their decisions in allowing them to fall into sin, but he doesn't have the evil intent that Adam and Eve did in choosing to disobey God.

*Student:* Well, I guess the question is which actually works better. I never have been able to figure that one out – which one of the two actually works better as far as an explanation of how the Fall occurred?

*Dr. Craig:* Is the alternative you're suggesting that God is the author of evil?

*Student:* Actually, I don't believe he is, but it's almost hard to . . . philosophically, I don't believe he is. But at the same time, practically speaking, it almost kind of does seem like he is.

*Dr. Craig:* Well, I think that Molina's distinction can help us to understand the way in which God is the cause of everything that happens. Nothing happens without his direct will or permission, but God is not the author of evil because he doesn't have the evil intentions that these secondary agents do. I think we've got to resist with all our might the notion that God is the author of evil. I would sooner deny concurrence altogether than ascribe to God the source of evil.

*Student:* I think another way to look at this also is not from a moral point of view but from the idea that God is a God of order. That if God is constantly changing the physical



properties of the universe to prevent evil then he has created a universe in which cause and effect does not exist. He created a universe of chaos in which we could not live, we could not learn, we could not really rely on our experiences from one second to the next. While that may prevent evil, I think that would very much contradict God as a God of order.

*Dr. Craig:* I think you're right, and the point that you are making here is to provide a rationale for concurrence in evil acts. As you say, this does produce an orderly world, not a chaos, in which rational exploration, discovery, science, and rational behavior is meaningful.

*Student:* I'm not sure I follow how Molina's style of concurrence preserves free will. Because if God were to ever choose to remove his concurrence then the individual then no longer has the free will to do what they want to do. They're trying to pull the boat alone and they can't do it in your example, unless you were to say that God always provides his concurrence to every decision.

*Dr. Craig:* I don't see how, in the example of Nebuchadnezzar and the children of Israel, that God's removing his concurrence from the flame does anything to remove Nebuchadnezzar's free will. He freely threw the children of Israel into the fire and tried to harm them. So he's responsible to God for that evil intent. But God saved them from his evil intent by withdrawing his concurrence from the flame. So if flames had free will, I think you'd be right. God has withdrawn his concurrence from the flames, and so they can't produce their effect. But flames obviously are not agents. They're just things, and so there's no annulling of their freedom, I think. Think about it.

*Student:* Along the lines of what someone earlier said, in order to have a lawful universe that we can participate in, God establishes laws that can be used in evil ways. But in order to have a sustainable, lawful universe, and us to have a free will, they also have to be able to be used in the wrong way. So gravity can be a source of a weapon, but it does a lot of other good things like keeping us tacked to the earth. So this is how it has to operate, otherwise you would have to say logically God shouldn't have created at all.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, because this makes rational behavior possible including moral choices. I think that's right.

*Student:* I was wondering if this could help in relation to . . . a lot of people struggle with the concept of where God hardens Pharaoh's heart and that type thing. So, for instance, if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff and someone comes up behind me and pushes me off the cliff, I fall down and die at the bottom of the cliff. Then there's why did I die? Well, first, it's the free will of the person who pushed me off the cliff. But it's also because of the law of gravity that I died, and it's also because of God's concurrence with the law of gravity that I died. And, yet, when somebody asked "Why did I die?" they're obviously



going to blame the free will even if the other two are just as valid of explanations. When it comes to God hardens Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh decided to reject God which was a free will decision on his part, however the natural law that follows from that is his heart is hardened. However, who does the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? It is God. But it's simply following the natural law of when man freely rejects God's free will. So it seems like it was God causing evil by hardening Pharaoh's heart; well, no, it's actually he is following the laws he set up which would be maybe part of concurrence but it's still man's free will that chose to reject him.

*Dr. Craig:* I can see where that would be an application of this. That's not one I had thought of but it's a possible contribution.

*Student:* I've was still thinking about the question that gentlemen had about the creation and the Fall and all that. The one thing that comes to my mind is, as far as creating and as far as the Fall and whether God caused evil in the world, the way I see it is God created man to be in his own image; such a high level of creation to be in the image of the Living God that we must have free will to worship him freely or else there's no value and that it would be a lower level of being if we didn't have that. I believe that it was necessary that we have that choice – to be able to choose to eat the apple or whatever the fruit is – and to fall into that sin. I would not see that as God causing the evil, but as the ultimate good was that we would then choose to freely worship him and we would be in that level of fellowship that he desired that we would commune with him as he created us for that high level of fellowship. That's more of a comment; you can tell me what you think on that one. But I was going to ask about the thing about the hardening of the heart, as well.

*Dr. Craig:* All right. Well, in view of the time, let me just comment on your first part of your question. I think free will is absolutely essential if we're to avoid making God the author of evil. I think you're quite right in saying that evil is to be attributed to the free choice of God's creatures to be oriented toward something other than God as the supreme good. The will is turned toward lesser goods rather than to God as the greatest good, and that is evil. That is what evil is – it's a privation of right order in the creaturely will, and that isn't brought about by God. God is all good and he doesn't produce evil, but he does produce a creature which has freedom, and that is a great good because, as you say, that makes our worship and service to God meaningful.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Next time we will turn to the doctrine of divine providence where we will explore ways in which God is active in the world; that is to say, what is God's relationship to these secondary causes that operate in the world and of which we ourselves are a part.<sup>28</sup>

## Lecture 10: Different Views of Divine Providence

Today we turn to a new topic under the doctrine of creation which is the doctrine of divine providence. Divine providence concerns God's governance or supervision of the world – all that happens. The biblical worldview has a very strong conception of divine sovereignty over the world and human affairs, but at the same time it also presupposes human freedom and responsibility.

Let's look then first at the biblical data concerning divine providence. With regard to divine sovereignty, the biblical passages affirming God's sovereignty are too numerous to read here during this time, but the New Testament scholar Donald Carson has summarized them under four main headings in his book, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*. I'll share with you Carson's four summary points.<sup>29</sup>

Number one would be that God is the Creator, the Ruler, and the Possessor of all things. So the first would be that stream of passages in the Bible teaching that God is the Creator, Ruler, and Possessor of all things. Number two is that God is the ultimate personal cause of all that happens. The second point then is the passages in the Scripture that affirm that God is the ultimate personal cause of everything that happens. Number three is that God elects his people. God has chosen a certain people for himself and has called them to himself. So number three is that God elects his people. Finally, number four is that God is the unacknowledged source of good fortune or success. Nothing really happens by luck alone, rather behind good fortune or success God is the unacknowledged source of those benefits. So those four points would summarize the passages in Scripture teaching a very strong view of divine sovereignty. Nobody who takes these passages seriously, I think, can entertain the currently fashionable revisionist views of divine sovereignty which denies that God really is in control of everything that happens in the world and that his providence does not extend to every detail of what happens.

On the other hand, at the same time, the conviction that human beings are free and responsible moral agents also permeates the Hebrew way of thinking. Carson summarizes these passages under nine headings and they are as follows.<sup>30</sup> Number one is that people face a multitude of divine exhortations and commands. God issues commandments and exhorts people to do certain things which presupposes that they have the ability to follow those commands and exhortations. In fact, the second point – number two – is that people are said to obey, believe, and choose God. They can respond to his exhortations and commands. Three, however, people also sin and rebel against God. They do not necessarily do what he commands or exhorts them to do. People often sin and rebel

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<sup>29</sup> D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, New Foundations Theological Library (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. 24-35

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-22.

against God. Number four follows from that – people’s sins are then judged by God. God holds people responsible for their sin and rebellion against him. Five, people are tested by God. God tests people in order to see the genuineness of their faith and the truth of their commitment to him. So people are tested by God which shows that he treats them as free and responsible moral agents. Number six is that people receive divine rewards. When people do respond in an appropriate way to God's commands and exhortations then God rewards them for their faithfulness. People receive divine rewards. Number seven – the elect are responsible to respond to God's gracious initiative. Remember we saw under divine sovereignty that God elects his people, but now at the same time this seventh point is that the elect are responsible to respond to God's gracious initiatives in electing them. Number eight – prayers are not mere showpieces scripted by God in a kind of dictatorial way. No one who reads the Psalms and the anguish of the prayers in the Psalms can think that these are mere dictations from God and not genuine expressions of human freedom. Finally, number nine, the last point – God literally pleads with sinners to repent and be saved. God wants people to be saved, but he doesn't force them to be saved. He pleads with them to repent and be saved. To this list of nine points or streams of tradition in the Scripture I would add a tenth one, and that would be all of those passages that speak of God's repenting in reaction to a change in human behavior. There are a number of passages in the Scripture where God threatens to do something to bring judgment on people but then they change and God repents of the threatened judgment that he was going to bring upon them. That, I think, also shows that, in addition to God's sovereign control of affairs, people have the ability to respond or not respond to God and so bring about a change on God's part. These passages – these ten different streams of biblical teaching – I think rule out any sort of deterministic understanding of divine providence which would preclude significant human freedom.

The question is, of course, how do you put these together? How do you construct a model of divine providence that can equally affirm the scriptural teaching on divine sovereignty but as well human freedom and responsibility?

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Would these ten things that you just outlined hold for all of the different – the three different – viewpoints that you outline: Molinism, Arminianism, and Calvinism?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. Carson himself is a Calvinist, and yet he recognizes these nine streams of scriptural teaching that affirm human freedom and responsibility. So he's quite candid about that. I think we'll see when we get to our systemic summary that in some way all of these different schools want to affirm both of these points. But the question will be: who has the best model for doing it? Which one can put them together in such a way as to not bruise the biblical data concerning one or the other point?

## END DISCUSSION

Theologians in dealing with the subject of divine providence have typically distinguished between God's *providentia ordinaria* (or God's ordinary providence) and *providentia extraordinaria* (God's extraordinary providence). God's extraordinary providence is his performance of miracles, where God acts in the world apart from using secondary natural causes as instruments. We will talk about God's extraordinary providence when we get to the subject of miracles. Here we want to talk about God's ordinary providence, which is non-miraculous in nature, and ask: How is it that God governs or superintends the world, especially the world of free creatures (like human beings), in such a way that his ends are achieved through the free decisions of human beings? The principal challenge that faces any account of God's ordinary providential governance of the world is going to be how do you reconcile divine sovereignty with creaturely freedom, particularly human freedom. Here I want to highlight three competing views in this respect.

The first would be Calvinism, or also called Reformed theology but is from John Calvin, the great Swiss-French Reformer. Calvinism affirms divine determinism – that God unilaterally determines everything that happens in a causal way. This is a kind of divine unilateral causal determinism of everything that happens. That would obviously give the Calvinist a very, very strong doctrine of divine sovereignty because God causally determines everything that happens. Now, you might say, but doesn't that completely obliterate human freedom? How can the Calvinist affirm human freedom? Well, the Calvinist affirms a view of freedom according to which freedom is compatible with causal determinism. So this view of freedom is usually called compatibilism. Compatibilists maintain that being causally determined to do something is not incompatible with doing it freely. By contrast, those who hold to incompatibilist views of human freedom (sometimes called libertarian views of freedom) would say that if you're causally determined to do something then you don't really do it freely. It is incompatible to do something freely and to be causally determined to do it. So the Calvinist adopts a compatibilist view of human freedom according to which you can do something freely even though you're causally determined by God to do it. Now, how can he make this claim plausible? I think it is by reinterpreting freedom to mean basically doing something voluntarily. He affirms a view of freedom as equivalent to voluntarism; that is to say, God doesn't make you do something against your will. It's not as though he drags you kicking and screaming to do something. You do it willingly even though you're causally determined by God to do it. In that sense it's free. It's voluntary. You don't have the ability to do anything different. This is not libertarian freedom. In these circumstances God has determined you to do it. You cannot do anything else. You cannot act otherwise, but nevertheless you do it freely. You do it voluntarily. To give an illustration of this, imagine a terrorist who wants to mow down a crowd of people by driving a van into the

crowd thereby killing the people, and so he presses his foot on the accelerator and plows into the crowd killing or maiming many people. Suppose that, in fact, the accelerator was stuck so that he didn't need to press his foot on it at all. It would still have gone into the crowd and kill the people. The causal factors of the automobile made the automobile mow down the people and kill them, and the fact that he was putting his foot on the pedal really made no difference whatsoever. The Calvinist would say this would be an illustration of his doing this voluntarily even though the action was determined. It was causally determined by the malfunction of the automobile that these people would be mowed down and killed, but the terrorist nevertheless did it voluntarily. He didn't do it against his will. So on the Calvinist view you have a unilateral divine causal determinism of everything that happens but nevertheless people don't do it against their will. They do it voluntarily.

In contrast to Calvinism would be the view called Arminianism from the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius. Arminianism affirms libertarian freedom – that people do have the ability to do otherwise in free situations and that they are not causally determined by God to do everything that they do. There is genuine human libertarian freedom to do an act or to refrain from doing that act, and God does not causally determine you to do what you do. This view seems to affirm in a very robust way human freedom and responsibility. You freely choose to do these things, not simply voluntarily but in a non-determined way. It's up to you, and so God can hold you responsible. That seems to affirm that second stream of tradition in Scripture for human freedom and responsibility. How does the Arminian then explain divine sovereignty? The Arminian appeals to God's simple foreknowledge of the future in order to explain God's foreordination of everything that happens. That is to say, on the basis of his knowledge of what people will do God then foreordains that it will happen, and his foreknowing it in no way determines it. He just knows that that's what people will do. He knows what they're free choices will be, and therefore he declares and ordains that that is what is going to happen. That in no more determines their choices than, say, an infallible barometer would determine the weather. If you had an infallible barometer it would tell you with absolute certainty what the weather is going to be, but obviously the barometer doesn't determine the weather. It just infallibly tells you what the weather will be. If there's any determinism here it would be the other way around. The weather would determine the readings of the barometer. In a similar way, God's foreknowledge will give you absolute certainty about what is going to happen, but it's not as though the foreknowledge determines what will happen. God foreknows as he does because this is how people will choose, and then he ordains that it will happen in virtue of his foreknowledge. So he's sovereign because he foreknows what's going to happen in the future.

Opposed to both of these views is a third view which is called Molinism, which is after the Jesuit counter-Reformer Luis Molina. Molina also affirmed, like the Arminian, that people have libertarian freedom – that God does not causally determine everything that is going to happen. It's up to you to choose in these freedom-permitting circumstances whatever you would like to do. But Molina has a different solution to the question of how God is sovereign. He says it's not enough that God looks into the future and sees what will happen. In a sense, that comes too late for God to be able to plan anything. He looks in the future, he sees what's going to happen, foreordination then becomes a sort of fifth wheel. It doesn't do anything. Rather, Molina's doctrine of providence is based upon his doctrine of middle knowledge. Middle knowledge is different than simple foreknowledge. Simple foreknowledge tells you what will happen. Middle knowledge is God's knowledge of what would happen under different circumstances. Molina maintains that logically prior to God's decree to create a world God knows how any possible person that he might create would freely choose in any circumstances he might place him. So, for example, God knew logically prior to his creating the world that if you had been the procurator of Judea in the first century instead of Pilate, God knows what you would have done when Jesus of Nazareth was presented before you – whether you would have condemned him to the cross or merely scourged him or perhaps declared him innocent and let him go. On the basis of his middle knowledge of what free persons would freely do in these various circumstances God then decrees to create certain persons and to place them in certain sets of freedom-permitting circumstances. On that basis then he knows exactly how the future will go so that the world is governed by God in virtue of his middle knowledge – of knowing how everybody would act in any circumstances he put them in. Then, by putting them in those circumstances, he's able to arrive ultimately at his ends through the free decisions of creatures. It's extremely important in understanding the Molinist doctrine of providence to keep in mind that these circumstances are freedom-permitting circumstances. It's not that you're determined to do what you would do in those circumstances; it's just that God knows how you would freely do.

Here's an analogy. When the FBI wants to catch a child pornographer or a drug dealer, they will often arrange a sting operation where they will have someone pretend to want to buy the child pornography or want to purchase the drugs. The minute the money exchanges hands the FBI nabs him and he's captured. Now, the criminal will inevitably claim that this sting operation was a setup – that it determined him to do that and that he couldn't resist in those circumstances selling the drugs or the pornography, and that therefore he cannot be held responsible and convicted. But if the FBI has done its job well, as it knows how to do, it will not put the criminal in circumstances in which he is coerced to act as he does. It's just that they know him well enough that they know that he would freely sell the contraband if he were placed in those circumstances. Therefore the

judge will rule that this was not coercion but that in fact he freely sold the contraband and so can be held responsible. So on Molinism the idea is that God has arranged which people exist in which freedom-permitting circumstances so that through the free decisions of creatures God's ultimate ends will someday be achieved, and God then concurs with the free decisions of these creatures in producing their effects. That was the doctrine of simultaneous concurrence that we talked about last week.

We're about out of time, so rather than open it for the discussion at this point let me say think about these three views. Ask yourself which one gives the best model for integrating divine sovereignty and human freedom. What we'll do next week is begin with any questions that you have, and then I will give my own personal assessment of these three views and – surprise, surprise – you will see which one of the views I favor.<sup>31</sup>



## Lecture 11: A Critical Assessment of Three Views of Divine Providence

Last time we discussed three competing accounts of divine providence: Calvinism (which posits a universal divine causal determinism coupled with a compatibilist view of human freedom), Arminianism (which postulates human freedom – libertarian freedom – coupled with simple foreknowledge of the future so that God foreordains or predestines what he knows via his foreknowledge will take place), and finally we looked at the Molinist view of providence (according to which God knows what any free person would freely do in any set of circumstances in which God might place him and thus by choosing to create certain persons in certain circumstances God can so providentially order the world that his purposes are ultimately achieved through the free decisions of creatures).

### START DISCUSSION

*Student:* Regarding middle knowledge . . . the question is: is there more to it than just . . .? From what I understand, I think it's a theoretical knowledge, correct? But is there more to it than that?

*Dr. Craig:* What do you mean by “theoretical knowledge?”

*Student:* What I understand from what you have said in the past and even last week was that God can look at things from the perspective of what would happen in any given situation or something like that. So the way I understand that is – I'm kind of boiling that down to theoretical knowledge as opposed to maybe actual knowledge because not everything that can happen actually does happen. Is that a good way of looking at it?

*Dr. Craig:* I don't think the word “theoretical” captures it very well. What about the word “hypothetical?” It's knowledge of what would happen if such-and-such were the case. It's a hypothetical knowledge. But it is important to understand that this hypothetical knowledge is actual knowledge. The situations that are envisioned in the if-clause (“if such-and-such were the case”) may never happen; that's true. In that sense it's not actual. Indeed, these types of hypothetical if-then statements are often called counterfactuals because the antecedent clause is never actualized. But nevertheless it is knowledge of the actual world. These counterfactuals are actually true. It really is true that if Peter were in exactly these circumstances he would freely deny Christ three times. It is not true that he would boldly stand for Christ in those circumstances. He would deny him three times. So it is knowledge of the actual world. But it is hypothetical knowledge of how persons would behave under certain circumstances.

*Student:* If you don't mind, I just had a follow up on that. OK, so hypothetical knowledge then. I would agree with you that if God has all knowledge then he would have hypothetical knowledge.

*Dr. Craig:* Could I just comment on that? Your point is a good one. The Reformed theologians didn't deny that God has this sort of hypothetical knowledge. But they would say that he only has it logically posterior to his decree to create a world whereas Molina thought he had this knowledge logically prior to his decree to create a world. What the Calvinist says is that God determines which counterfactuals are true and which are false. It is God who determines that if Peter were in such-and-such circumstances he would freely deny Christ three times. That is the result of God's decree. Whereas on Molina's view, this knowledge and the truth of that statement is independent of God's decree. It is logically prior to God's decree. Molina thought that both the followers of Thomas Aquinas as well as the Protestant reformers like Calvin robbed people of significant freedom because they were determined what they would do in any circumstances God might place them in.

*Student:* Just one quick thing, and you might have already answered this with what you just said, but I just want to make sure that . . . if God . . . Here's what I'm trying to understand. If God has all knowledge – hypothetical knowledge, actual knowledge, whatever – my question is if he's got the actual knowledge then why would he need to use then the hypothetical knowledge in his, say, decision-making process?

*Dr. Craig:* Because he needs to decide which persons to create in which circumstances. Suppose that via his middle knowledge God knew that if Peter were in precisely those circumstances in the high priests' courtyard that he would freely stand for Christ and would not deny Christ three times. Then in that case, given that it's God's will that that happen, he wouldn't have created Peter in those circumstances. He would have either put him in some other circumstances or put a different disciple in the courtyard where he would deny three Christ times. Similarly with Judas. Suppose that it's God's will that Judas betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin thus condemning him to the cross. He can do that because he knows what Judas would freely do in those circumstances. And if Judas wouldn't freely do it then God would have to find some other way – he'd have to put somebody else in the circumstances or find some other circumstances in which Judas would betray Jesus. So this middle knowledge is absolutely vital to God's planning and providentially ordering a world of free creatures without robbing them of their freedom. Good questions, thank you.

*Student:* Last week I know you're on Calvinism, Armenianism, and Molinism. On Armenianism, if God knows what is going . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Can I just issue a corrective? This is not insignificant. It's Arminianism, not Armenianism. Armenian is a nationality – from Armenia, over in the Middle East around Azerbaijan. Arminianism (with an "i") is from Jacob Arminius, the Protestant theologian. So on Arminianism . . . go ahead.

*Student:* OK, right, the latter – regarding God knowing what is going to happen. Last week I know you said *therefore he's ordained it*. How do you reconcile that with the evil that happens? I guess I'm asking for the definition of “ordained” in that regard.

*Dr. Craig:* It is easy to reconcile with the evil in the world – at least human evil – because God doesn't determine what those agents will do. He gives them free will and lets them decide how they want, but they simply can't escape God's foreknowledge of it. He knows the evil acts that they will do. God's knowledge is, as I said, like an infallible barometer of the weather. It predicts infallibly what will happen, but the readings of the barometer don't determine the weather. In the same way, God's foreknowledge doesn't determine people to do evil acts. I think your follow-up question there is a very good one – well, then what does foreordination or predestination really amount to on this view? It seems to be simply the declaration that these foreknown events will happen. God looks into the future, sees that these things will happen, and therefore he declares or decrees these things will happen.

*Student:* There's an example that Jesus used – a king that issues an invitation to the banquet. All the invited people turned down the invitation, so he sent out servants to go to the street to invite anybody, and the banquet still happens. Isn't this just the way that God operates? He always issues relational invitations, and yet people choose to accept or turn down. If they turn down, still the relationship has been built, just with someone else.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that would be the Molinist or Arminian view. Yes, people have the freedom to turn down God's gracious invitations, and if they do, God can invite others. It's interesting, though, in that parable what the king says to his servants is, *Go out into the highways and the byways and compel them to come in*, which sounds like coercion. Sadly in church history this verse has been used to justify religious persecution on the part of the institutional church where, for example, the Catholic authorities would compel people under pain of persecution or death to obey and believe in the Gospel. So the parable, I think you've rightly interpreted it, but it does have this expression in there “compel them” which is kind of interesting.

*Student:* I'm trying to understand the difference between the Calvinist and the Molinist view. The Calvinist I believe would say if something happens or you make a decision because God told you to make that decision, you're under his will and that's what he wanted you to do. Whereas the Molinist, I feel like you were just saying God knows all the different alternatives and so he's going to pick the hypothetical situation where he knows you're going to make the decision that he wanted you to make in that moment. So what ultimately is the difference if ultimately you're just making the decision God wants you to do? What's the difference between him just making you do it and him choosing the hypothetical situation where he knew you would make the decision?

*Dr. Craig:* The difference – and I think you highlighted it accurately – is freedom. On the one view people are causally determined to do what they do. Whereas on the Molinist view, they have genuine libertarian freedom to do the act or not, but God simply knows which one they would choose. So they both have an extremely strong view of divine sovereignty. God is in control. But the one is compatible with libertarian freedom and the other one isn't.

*Student:* I guess I just didn't see the freedom. If God is choosing the situation where he knew you would make that decision, like the whole thing with Peter you were just given. To me there really isn't any freedom because God chose the hypothetical situation where he knew that you would act in that way in that moment. See the difference?

*Dr. Craig:* But when he puts you in that situation, even though he knows how you would freely act, he doesn't do anything to determine you to act in that way. It's hands off. God puts you in the situation and then he steps back and lets you make the choice. He just knows how you would choose. Molina would add as well that in every good moral choice you make, God wills that you choose the good, but in any evil moral choice you make, that is not God's perfect will. In every situation in which a person finds himself, it is always God's will – his absolute will – that that person choose the good and do the right thing. But God, as I say, permits them to choose evil acts even though that doesn't represent his absolute will. But it is his conditional will, so to speak, to permit them to do that because he knows that he will be able to ultimately achieve his purposes even through these evil choices. So although both views have a very strong affirmation of divine sovereignty, they are radically different with respect to human freedom.

*Student:* I'm curious how these three different views line up with different church traditions or denominations. So, for example, I think we all know that Calvinism is the official doctrine of Presbyterian denomination, but are there other denominations or groups that have as their official doctrine Arminianism or Molinism?

*Dr. Craig:* Methodists and other persons in the Wesleyan tradition will be Arminian, whereas Lutherans and Reformed Presbyterian denominations will be Calvinist or Augustinian in their doctrine. There isn't any Molinist denomination, interestingly enough. Molina was a Catholic counter-Reformer. He was a Jesuit. He was a member of the Jesuit Society. For a couple of centuries the Jesuit Society was dominated by Molinism but then it fell into disuse and was eclipsed for a few centuries until being revived in the 1970s by analytic philosophers of religion working in the United States who had never even heard of Luis Molina. So Molinism isn't identified with any particular confessing tradition or denomination. It's Catholic, but it isn't the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. I should say that following Molina's exposition of his theory, there was a long, long inquiry in Rome as to whether or not this doctrine was

orthodox or whether it was heretical. On several occasions it appeared that Molina was on the verge of condemnation and could have been dragged before the Inquisition, even burned at the stake. But at each time the council drew back, and finally the Pope declared that either Molinism or Thomism are equally valid options for Catholic theologians, and therefore the Jesuits were orthodox, good Catholics. So the view is tolerated within Catholicism, but, as I say, was allowed to atrophy for several centuries until now being recently revived.

*Student:* You know I gotta weigh in on this! I see these three views as an attempt to wedge God's omniscience into time and space. I offer the fourth view. These things exist in tension (free will, responsibility, and God's election) by a being that's not bound by time and space. As soon as we introduce time and space this is problematic because we're bound that way. God isn't. My favorite verse with this always is Romans 4:17 – *God calls all things as though they are.*

*Dr. Craig:* Let me say in response to your point, certainly there is always the option to say it is a mystery and we cannot provide a model that resolves divine sovereignty and human freedom and that this is hidden in the counsels of God. But while I think that that is a legitimate response – God is after all ultimately incomprehensible in the sense that we cannot completely comprehend him by human intelligence – I think that this would only be a last resort theologically. It would only be after diligent, hard thinking and inquiry into the subject that one should throw up one's hands and say it's insoluble, it's a mystery, and I don't think we're at that point. I think that we can provide a good model. I would say, too, that none of these models that we've talked about here depend upon thinking that God is in time. Calvin and other Reformed theologians would take God to be timeless, so would Thomas Aquinas. As for Molina, I think he could also affirm the timelessness of God. I'm not sure what his exact view was, but there's nothing about his view that requires that God be temporal. And the same for Arminianism. When the Arminian speaks of foreknowledge of the future, that might sound like God is in time, but that is talking about what God knows from our perspective. From our perspective it's foreknowledge, but, as you say, if God is outside of time then he doesn't literally foreknow the future; he just knows what is future for us. So Arminianism as well, which affirms foreknowledge, is also consistent with God's being timeless.

*Student:* I think I need just a little bit more clarification about God's perfect will versus his permissive will. You said it's God's will for Peter to deny Christ three times. His perfect will for Peter would not be for him to deny Christ, however he put him in a situation because it was, I guess, his permissive will for him to deny Christ three times. Would you have to bring in God's intentions for that? Like, *It is my will for Peter to be put in a situation where he will deny Christ three times because later he'll look back on*

*this and he'll be a stronger Christian for it? Would you bring in his intentions and why this would be his permissive will vs. his perfect will?*

*Dr. Craig:* I think that is exactly right. The distinction is between God's absolute will for Peter (which is always that he not do evil; that he not sin) and his conditional will for Peter which would be based upon, as you say, these intentions as to how this would work out in Peter in becoming the leader of the early church and being effective as the head of the church and all that Peter had to learn through this terrible incident of denying Christ. So those would be his conditional intentions for Peter where he might be led to permit Peter to do something that is not in a sense God's absolute will for Peter. These are great questions.

*Student:* I'd like to bring this into personal experience. If God creates me in a certain way because he knows I'm going to react to a certain situation a certain way, puts me in that situation, gives me a weapon, I use the weapon, and he knew obviously from creating me, how do I have free choice and how will I be judged?

*Dr. Craig:* You have free choice because you're not causally determined to use that weapon. You choose to use the weapon of your own free will. It's up to you – that is to say on the Arminian or Molinist view. On the Calvinist view, God moves your will to pull the trigger and use the weapon. In that case I think it is difficult to see how you do so freely because you're causally determined to do it. The most the Calvinist can affirm is, as I said, a sort of compatibilist view of freedom where freedom is compatible with being causally determined. You don't do it against your will when you pull the trigger, so in that sense it's voluntary. But nevertheless you are causally determined to do it. On Arminianism and Molinism that's just not the case. It is as causally indeterminate as a quantum physical event on the standard Heisenberg interpretation of quantum indeterminacy. It's just not causally determined. It's indeterminate.

*Student:* I think every good parent uses middle knowledge when they're raising very young children with sweets. My question deals with how far out does God choose to have middle knowledge? You were saying he had it before creation. I don't think . . . If you went out indefinitely maybe you really don't have libertarian free will. But to have sovereignty, like most Baptists believe, God is totally sovereign. He uses middle knowledge in the moment to guide a king's heart like water in his hand.

*Dr. Craig:* Let me respond to a couple of interesting things you've said. I think you are absolutely right that as parents or in ordinary rational decision-making we use this kind of hypothetical knowledge or counterfactual knowledge all the time. When I'm at a light wanting to turn right on the red, I look at the oncoming traffic and I think, *If I were to pull out now I would make it.* That's this kind of hypothetical knowledge. Or, *If I want a raise from the boss, I think, no, I better not go ask because if I were to ask he would tear*



*my head off*. So we use this kind of knowledge all the time in rational decision-making. Now, our ability to know these kind of counterfactuals is obviously very limited. As you say, it doesn't go very far out. But for an omniscient being whose knowledge is infinite, I would say that God's knowledge goes endlessly out all the way into the future without end. That's important because that means that God may permit certain things to happen in our lives whose reason will not emerge until three hundred years from now or a thousand years from now or maybe even in the afterlife. Therefore it is impossible (this is related to the problem of evil) for us to say God has no good reason for allowing this tragedy to enter our lives. We simply are too limited in our knowledge to know what might be God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting this event to occur because his middle knowledge just infinitely outstrips what we know of these kinds of counterfactual situations.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's turn to an assessment of these three views.

First, the Calvinist view depends, as you recall, upon universal divine causal determinism of events in order to explain divine providence. And here I want to raise five points of critique.

First of all, I do not think that universal divine causal determinism can offer a coherent interpretation of Scripture. Interestingly enough, many of the classical Reformed theologians freely admit this. They acknowledge that the reconciliation of scriptural texts which affirm human freedom and contingency are irreconcilable with scriptural texts affirming divine sovereignty. They would say it's a mystery. It is inscrutable and simply beyond our ability to formulate.

You can reconcile universal divine causal determinism with human freedom by interpreting freedom in compatibilist terms. Compatibilism actually entails determinism. The problem is that I think adopting compatibilism achieves reconciliation with human freedom only at the expense of denying what the scriptural texts seem clearly to affirm, that is to say genuine indeterminacy and contingency of our free choices. So the first criticism is that universal divine causal determinism cannot really give us a coherent model of the scriptural teaching on divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Secondly, universal causal determinism cannot be rationally affirmed. There is a sort of dizzying self-defeating character to determinism. For if you come to believe that determinism is true then you have to believe that the reason you believe determinism is true is because you were determined to believe it. You have not, in fact, been able to freely weigh the arguments pro and con and make up your mind on that basis. So the difference between a person who believes the arguments for determinism and the person who rejects the arguments for determinism is simply that the one has been determined to



believe the arguments and the other one has been determined not to believe them. When you come to realize that your decision to believe in determinism was itself determined and that even your present realization of that fact is itself also causally determined then a sort of vertigo sets in because everything you think (even that very thought itself) is outside of your control. Determinism on this view could be true. This doesn't show determinism is false. Maybe everything is determined. But it's very hard to see how determinism could ever be rationally affirmed because its affirmation would undermine the rationality of that affirmation. So the second point is that universal causal determinism cannot be rationally affirmed.

The third point is that universal divine causal determinism makes God the author of sin and it undercuts human responsibility. Curiously some Reformed theologians seem to admit as much. For example, the Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck admits that if we construe divine conservation as God's recreation of the world at each successive moment (in other words, occasionalism) he says, "All created beings would then exist in appearance only and be devoid of all independence, freedom and responsibility. God himself would be the cause of sin."<sup>32</sup> But given determinism, there's no more independence, freedom, and responsibility than on recreation at every subsequent moment for on the deterministic view even the movement of the human will is caused by God. God moves people to choose evil and they cannot do otherwise. God determines their choices and makes them do what is wrong. If it's evil to make another person do something wrong then on this view God is not only the cause of sin and evil but he becomes evil himself, which is absurd. By the same token, all human responsibility for sin has been obliterated because our choices are not really up to us. God causes us to make them, and therefore we cannot really be responsible for our actions for nothing that we think or do is up to us. So the third criticism is that universal divine causal determinism makes God the author of sin and it undercuts human responsibility.

The fourth criticism is that universal divine causal determinism nullifies human agency. Since our choices are not up to us but are in fact caused by God, human beings cannot be said to be real agents. They are mere instruments by means of which God produces some effect, much like a man using a stick to move a stone. Of course, the secondary instrumental causes retain all of their properties and powers as intermediate causes just as a stick retains its powers and properties which make it suitable for the purpose of moving a stone with it. So the Calvinist thinkers do not need to be occasionalists like Malebranche or the medieval Muslim theologians. They can affirm that these intermediate secondary causes have real powers and properties. But notice that these intermediate causes are not agents themselves. They are mere instruments, mere

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32                      Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, God and Creation, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 607.

instrumental causes, for they have no power to initiate action on their own. Hence, on determinism there really is at the end of the story only one agent in the world and that is God. The Reformed theologian of the 19th century, B. B. Warfield, affirms, “The reality and real efficiency of all second causes . . . as the proximate producers of the effect that takes place”<sup>33</sup> – so he affirms that these secondary or instrumental causes have real efficiency and reality, but he doesn't answer the objection that in a deterministic world these intermediate secondary causes are mere instruments and therefore does not answer the objection that in a deterministic world there is only one agent, namely God. But this conclusion goes not only against our knowledge of ourselves as agents but it also makes it inexplicable why God then would treat us as agents, holding us responsible for what he caused us to do and used us to do. So the fourth criticism is that universal divine causal determinism nullifies human agency.

Finally, the fifth criticism is that universal divine causal determinism makes reality into a farce. The whole world becomes a vain and empty spectacle. There are no free agents in rebellion against God, no free agents to whom God speaks to win them through his love, no one who freely responds to that love and freely gives his love and praise to God in return. The whole spectacle is just a charade whose only real actor is God himself. To illustrate, I remember seeing several years ago an arresting cartoon which depicted a marionette with strings attached to him standing behind a podium giving a speech. The marionette was saying, “Now concerning the Reformed doctrine of predestination.” And then when you look at the audience listening to the marionette, they were all marionettes with their strings attached! As you look at the picture the whole thing just looked like a farce. It was just nonsensical. So I'm convinced that far from glorifying God, Calvinism actually denigrates God for engaging in such a farcical charade. It's insulting to God to think that he would create beings who are in every respect causally determined by him and then treat them as though they were free agents, punishing them for the wrong actions that he made them do, or loving them as though they were freely responding agents. God on this view would be like a little child that sets up his toy soldiers and then moves them around in his play world pretending that they are real persons whose every motion is not, in fact, of his own doing and then pretending that they somehow merit praise or blame. So the fifth criticism is, again, that universal divine causal determinism makes reality into a farce.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I thought your second point about how determinism can't be rationally affirmed because everything we believe is determined . . . I'm just kind of thinking about that. In

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33 B. B. Warfield, “The Significance of the Confessional Doctrine of the Decree,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (1970-73; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 1:98-99.

what sense do we choose freely our beliefs? I've heard it said by some people, *If I go outside, can I really choose to believe that, say, the sky is green or something?*

*Dr. Craig:* I agree that for many of our beliefs we're not free to believe or not believe. It would be impossible for me to bring myself to believe that I'm not here in this room talking to you, or at least that you appear to be here. But when I look at the phenomenology of many of the other sorts of beliefs that I hold, I don't feel that I am determined to believe them. It seems to me that I do have the ability to choose to believe or not to believe and to weigh the arguments and the evidence and then freely make up my mind where the evidence lies. So while I think it's true that some beliefs force themselves upon us, that's certainly I don't think the case for many beliefs especially concerning these sorts of recondite matters that are not forced upon us.

*Student:* I've been thinking about your argument with respect to the rational unaffirmability of determinism for a while. I'm wondering if you should attenuate the argument a bit so that it only applies to internalists. According to Proper Functionalism, for example, my belief is warranted and is rational insofar as these external factors of proper function are in place but I needn't have epistemic access to what justifies those beliefs in order to know that. So don't you think this argument only applies if one is an internalist about knowledge?

*Dr. Craig:* All right, this is a very technical question which I haven't given due consideration to. You might well be correct. I'd have to think about that some more. I must say that for me, if I were to adopt this sort of functionalist view that would make these beliefs warranted and rational, it would still leave me extremely uncomfortable to think that I'm just determined to believe that and that the difference between me and you is simply that you were determined to believe one way and I was determined to believe the other way. But maybe you're right; maybe it does depend upon some sort of internalist access to these mental states. Good question.

*Student:* If determination is the truth the way you've described it, would it not nullify the need for Christ to have been sent to the Earth to be crucified for us to reach salvation?

*Dr. Craig:* What would make you say that? Let me respond and see how you would respond to this. The Reformed thinker would say that we find ourselves under God's just condemnation for our sin, and therefore if we are to be justified and redeemed then there needs to be a satisfaction of divine justice. Christ's death on the cross was therefore necessary to satisfy the demands of divine justice so that I might be saved even if my being saved is unilaterally determined by God. He would choose whom he wants to be saved and whom he would overlook. But nevertheless in order to be saved there needs to be an expiation of my sin. How would you respond to that?

*Student:* I think what we're saying then, if I understand it correctly, that when God created man (Adam and Eve) he, in fact, did have free will. He chose evil, therefore it was necessary for Christ to have died, but in that point in time it was that because sin had entered into the world, and therefore he's not the author of sin. But he determined from that point forward, or made the decision from that point forward, who would be saved and who wouldn't. Is that the way you understand it to be?

*Dr. Craig:* No, it's not. But even on that scenario, your original question was why would Christ need to die . . .

*Student:* I understand that now; yeah, it would be.

*Dr. Craig:* . . . of God's justice for our sin. But the question of whether or not Adam and Eve freely sinned is really interesting for the Calvinist because they were not sinful when they made that decision, right? They were innocent when they chose to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When I was in seminary as a student, Jan and I would pick up the Reformed theologian John Gerstner at the airport at O'Hare and drive him to the seminary to teach his classes. He was a visiting professor. And one of my professors teased me by saying, *Ask Gerstner (who is a Calvinist) why Adam and Eve sinned and fell.* Because on his view it's really difficult unless you say God determined Adam and Eve to fall. So there wasn't human freedom; he made them fall. Otherwise the Calvinist gives up his doctrine of divine sovereignty and providence.

*Student:* But that could be an explanation of why free will is mentioned – that when God created man in his image, he created him with free will, and man as in Adam chose with that free will to act to bring evil.

*Dr. Craig:* I think what is happening here now is our discussion is beginning to bleed over into the doctrine of salvation. Whereas the doctrine of providence is much broader than that. We are talking here about why I choose green jello rather than red jello when I go through the cafeteria line. The Calvinist would say God determines you to choose the red jello, whereas the Arminian and Molinist would say, no, he leaves that free choice up to you. Now, whether or not the decision to believe in Christ for salvation is free and indeterminate, that's another question. That's going to depend, as you say, on the doctrine of sin and the degree to which we are slaves to sin, and God's prevenient grace in our lives. While that is related, at least for now this doctrine of providence is much, much broader than the decision to believe in Christ for salvation.

*Student:* So the Calvinist believes everything, whether you pick green jello or red, is determined, not just who is going to be saved.

*Dr. Craig:* Right, that's the force of the word "universal." When I say "universal divine causal determinism" it is that every detail is sovereignly decreed by God to happen. So

there is no libertarian freedom on this view. This is because of the desire to have a very, very strong doctrine of divine sovereignty.

*Student:* That's predestination?

*Dr. Craig:* It's more than just predestination. Predestination usually has to do with salvation. This is a strong doctrine of providence.

**END DISCUSSION<sup>34</sup>**

## Lecture 12: Arminian And Molinist Accounts of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

In our study of divine providence we've looked critically at the Calvinist view of providence, and I offered a five-point critique last Sunday of that reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Today we want to turn our attention to the Arminian account of divine sovereignty and human freedom on the basis of God's foreknowledge of the future.

Consider the following biblical passage from Acts 4:27-28:

for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus . . . both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place.

Here we have a staggering assertion of divine sovereignty over the affairs of men. The conspiracy to crucify Jesus (which involved not only the Romans but also the Jews living in Jerusalem at that time, but more particularly by name Pilate and Herod who tried Jesus) is said to have happened by God's plan based upon his foreordination. How can the Arminian make sense of so sweeping a sovereignty as this?

The proponent of God's simple foreknowledge can make no good sense, I think, of God's providential planning of a world of free creatures in the absence of middle knowledge. On such a view, God has (logically prior to his decree to create a world) only knowledge of all *possible* scenarios that could happen. But he has no knowledge at all of what *would* happen under any given circumstances. So even given the circumstances of the existence of the Roman Empire and the Jewish Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate and Herod and Jerusalem in the first century, God has no idea what these free agents would do in these circumstances. So logically posterior to God's decree to create a world involving such persons and circumstances, God must consider himself extraordinarily lucky that all of these people did exactly what he wanted them to. We can imagine God saying to himself, *What a break! Pilate and Herod and all those people each did exactly what they were supposed to do!* Actually, the situation is even worse than that because, given that the circumstances in which these actions were taken were themselves the result of innumerable prior contingent circumstances, God had no idea whether Herod or Pilate or the Israelite nation or the Roman Empire would even exist posterior to his divine decree to create a world. So God must be astonished to find himself in such a world – a world in which out of all possible worlds that he might have created, the world exists in which mankind falls into sin and God sends his only Son into human history as a substitutionary sacrificial offering to rescue fallen humanity.

Of course, I'm speaking anthropomorphically here in describing God's surprise, but the point remains that without middle knowledge God cannot know prior to his creative decree what the world would be like. If the Arminian goes on to appeal to God's foreknowledge of the future in order to say that God's foreordination of future events is based upon his simple foreknowledge then this trivializes the doctrine of foreordination or predestination – it makes it a kind of fifth-wheel that bears no weight. For if God knows that something will happen then there's nothing more to foreordain. If it will happen then it will happen. The future by definition is whatever will happen, so if it will happen, it will happen. Foreordination becomes a redundancy, and surely there's much more to the biblical doctrine of foreordination than the triviality that God ordains that what will happen will happen.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* If God's foreknowledge is, say, if we compare that with a mathematical equation and where, say,  $y=mx+b$ , and if human will are either on the equation or out of the equation and whether they will abide by the equation, doesn't that explain the foreknowledge? God knows the value where human will choose? Like last week, the example where the king throws a banquet and those people that their value system is outside of God's will will not attend the banquet but those that God compelled to come he raised the value so high that those people cannot resist?

*Dr. Craig:* That would not be the Arminian view because on the Arminian view people have libertarian freedom. This is not causal divine determinism. I think you would be right in saying that you can explain God's foreknowledge of what will happen on the basis that this is what will happen. These events will be freely chosen by these agents, and therefore God foreknows it. But you shouldn't think that in any way because he foreknows it therefore it's determined to happen. They could choose differently in those circumstances. But if they were then God would foreknow something different. So the point of the critique is that this kind of knowledge that we're talking about comes too late for God to do anything with it. If he doesn't have knowledge of what agents would freely do prior to his decree to create the world, but he only knows that after his decree, then it's too late to do anything. It doesn't serve to make a difference.

*Student:* He has a counter-plan when the thing doesn't happen as he intended – like he intended to throw a banquet but then if they reject it he goes out and finds other people and he still threw his banquet.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. But remember that illustration we gave last week was an illustration of middle knowledge, not simple foreknowledge. God knew who would refuse to come to the banquet and who would come if invited. But what we're talking about here is simply God's knowledge of who *will* come to the banquet and who *will not* come to the banquet.



The point of the criticism is that he only gets this kind of knowledge logically posterior to his decree to actualize a world. At that point it is redundant to look into the future, see what will happen, and then declare this is what will happen. Because, by definition, what will happen will happen. There's nothing more for foreordination or predestination to do.

*Student:* I'm wondering if the Arminian suffers from a similar problem that the objector to the fine-tuning argument suffers from. Since God wouldn't have a counterfactual knowledge logically prior to the divine creative decree then he wouldn't have counterfactual knowledge of certain quantum scenarios which are indeterministic. Neither would he have, for example, knowledge of what the constants and quantities of the universe would be like. If it's incredibly improbable that the constants and quantities in the universe obtain as they do – and that's to the discredit of atheism – then wouldn't it be also improbable to the discredit of the Arminian to affirm that we live in a world . . .

*Dr. Craig:* I think that would depend on whether or not you affirm that quantum indeterminacy is ontic, that is to say is it a feature of objective reality or is quantum indeterminacy simply epistemic (it is in your mind)? We cannot determine the precise position and momentum of a subatomic particle, but some theorists would say that doesn't mean that they don't have such quantities. They do even if they are not determinable by us. So if you think that this kind of indeterminacy is not real but just in your mind then it wouldn't be a problem for God or the Arminian to say that God has selected those constants and quantities that are physically determined by him and will produce a universe that's conducive to embodied conscious life like ourselves.

*Student:* Could the Arminians say (not advocating, just questioning) – and this speech that is quoted in Acts 4 is after Christ's resurrection and after the Ascension – could the Arminians say God did not have to foreknow Pontius Pilate and Herod doing these things in terms of Jesus' crucifixion in order to predestine or preordain that? Instead, logically prior to creation, God had determined that he would implement a redemptive plan. These circumstances occurred later, and looking back (these people here are looking backwards) now we can say that this was foreordained because God chose those circumstances at that time to implement his plan. He didn't have to foreknow these people logically prior to creation. Could the Arminian say that?

*Dr. Craig:* Well, it seems to me that he would. It says that they were gathered together to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place. How can people be predestined to do something if God doesn't even know that those people would exist or doesn't know what they would do?

*Student:* Couldn't you have just predestination of the general contours, not of the specific people?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, you could say that God causally determines the sort of broad circumstances and then lets agents run free within that. But that's why a verse like this one is so striking. It is so specific that you have not only the Jewish nation and the Roman Empire but by name Pilate and Herod were all planned out by God and predestined to do what they did in crucifying Jesus. This is not just setting the sort of general contours of history. This is knowledge that is so specific that it cries out for some sort of explanation as to how God could plan something so contingent to happen.

*Student:* Just to follow up on that question. This is more of a fundamental and basic question, but my understanding of the word that is translated into “predestination” is that it can be literally interpreted as knowing beforehand. Is that completely off-base?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes! *[laughter]* The word in the Greek for “foreknow” is *proginosko* which means to foreknow. But “foreordination” is *proorizo* which means foreordain. *Orizo* is to ordain something, so *proorizo* means to foreordain or sometimes translated predestined. Now, what the Arminian will say is that God’s foreordination is based on his foreknowledge. He looks into the future, sees what will happen, and then foreordains that that will happen. My criticism is that that trivializes the doctrine of foreordination because it just means that God declares that what will be will be, and that's a tautology. Of course what will be will be. So there's got to be something more to this doctrine than that.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let’s turn to a Molinist account of providence. If we take the biblical word for foreknowledge (*prognosis*) to encompass middle knowledge then we can make perfect sense of God's providential planning of a world of free agents for via his middle knowledge God knew exactly which persons if members of the Sanhedrin would freely vote for Jesus’ condemnation, which persons if in Jerusalem would freely demand Christ's death and favor the release of Barabbas, what Herod (if king) would freely do in reaction to Jesus, and what Pilate if holding the prefecture of Palestine in AD 30 would freely do under the pressure of the Jewish leaders and the crowd. Knowing all of the possible circumstances and persons involved and the permutations of these, God decreed to create just those circumstances and just those people who would freely do what God willed to happen. Thus, as Luke insists, the whole scenario unfolded according to God's plan.

This is truly mind-boggling if you reflect on it. When you think that the existence of the various circumstances and the persons involved were themselves the result of myriads of prior choices on the part of these and other free agents and that those in turn were predicated upon yet prior contingencies on and on into the past then you quickly see that only an omniscient mind could providentially direct a world of free creatures toward his

sovereignly established ends. In fact, Paul reflects, “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). I'll just read that remarkable verse again: “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” Once you grasp it, the doctrine of divine middle knowledge issues in adoration and praise of God for so breathtaking a sovereignty.

Most of the objections to a Molinist account of providence are really objections directed at the doctrine of middle knowledge itself. We've already talked about those in our study of divine omniscience when we studied the attributes of God together. But what specific objection might be raised, not against middle knowledge, but against the Molinist account of divine providence? Here the Reformed theologian might object that a Molinist theory of providence is too successful in showing how God could sovereignly control a world of free creatures. The Reformed theologian could say it gives God such control that the account ultimately becomes virtually indistinguishable from the Calvinistic view. For given that the circumstances (let's call them C) in which a person finds himself are freedom-permitting circumstances, it must be just a brute fact about how a person (call him P) would choose in circumstances C. But then there must be innumerable other circumstances (let's call them C\*) which differ from C in imperceptible ways in which person P would choose differently than he would in C. For example, maybe C\* involves a molecule in Alpha Centauri being moved a couple of centimeters in one direction. And in C\* the person would choose differently than he would in C. But then it would be plausible that what God could do would be by placing a free agent P in these circumstances he could get the free agent to freely do virtually anything that he wanted him to do without any deleterious impact upon God's providential plan. A causally remote event like a stellar event at Alpha Centauri wouldn't upset the applecart of God's providential plan here on Earth. So by placing P in C\* rather than C he can bring it about that P does whatever God wants him to do without upsetting his providential plan and thus God can sovereignly bring about any creaturely decision he wants and therefore any world that he wants.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I guess maybe I'm just not fully grasping this. I'm still a little confused here. How again is it that just because in C\* you say you have maybe a molecule that's moved differently – how is that supposed to make it such that somebody . . . ?

*Dr. Craig:* It's based upon the claim of the Reformed theologian that since these are freedom-permitting circumstances (they're indeterminate, right? They don't determine P to do what he does) that it must be just a brute fact. It's just a brute fact that that's how P would choose in C. But if that's the case then it might just be a brute fact that in C\* he

would choose differently. I sense your skepticism about that move, and I think it's well-placed, and I'll make that point myself. But in terms of understanding the objection, that's the idea. These are brute facts, and therefore God can fiddle around with the circumstances in imperceptible ways that won't hurt anything in which P would choose differently than he does in C.

*Student:* I want to say: so what? What I mean is, man still has his free will. He could, but God knows he won't.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, this class is so perceptive and smart. I mean, someone explains one objection, you nail the other one. I'm going to make that point in the next minute. You are right. So what? Good for you.

*Student:* Would people believing this theory try to claim something like quantum entanglement is the reason that you can alter an atom in a far off galaxy?

*Dr. Craig:* No, no. What you are talking about is when you have these experiments in which a couple of photons are sent in opposite directions so that they are so remote from each other no causal influence can go from one to the other given the finite velocity of the speed of light. And if you measure a certain type of measurement on one the other automatically takes on the correlated value even though there's no causality between them. This isn't appealing to anything like that. Indeed what the objector here is proposing is that there is no correlation between the events in C\* and the events in C. It's just a brute fact that if the agent P were in C\* he would choose differently. It's not because of any quantum entanglement.

*Student:* Would it be correct to say that this is more or less just Dean Zimmerman's anti-Molinist argument?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. What you are asking is is this an objection that has been pressed by Dean Zimmerman, a Christian philosopher at Rutgers. Also by Robin Collins. I'm going to be looking more at Collin's version than Zimmerman's.

*Student:* It's worth mentioning that there's a book called *Molinism and "Divine Voodoo Worlds"* by Randy Everist. You'll see him at ETS. He has an objection to this, and he calls it the "so-what" objection.

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, OK! Is this the book by Lang?

*Student:* No, this is by Randy Everist. He wrote it for his Masters. He'll be doing a lecture at ETS.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. And the title of the book?

*Student:* *Molinism and "Divine Voodoo Worlds"*

*Dr. Craig:* Voodoo! Oh, OK. Yeah, Zimmerman uses that word “voodoo” in this respect. OK, good, thank you.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's go ahead then and give some assessment of the objection.

I think at the very, very start we would do well to just pause a moment and ask ourselves even if this objection is sound, so what? It would do nothing, I think, to undermine the Molinist account of providence as such. In particular it wouldn't do anything to undermine the freedom of the person in whatever circumstances he finds himself because their choices are in every case causally undetermined. If a choice is freely made in C then that choice will be made in C\* as well in which some causally irrelevant event takes place that's not included in C. So if, when God places a person P in circumstances C, P's freedom is not compromised then it would not be compromised by the mere fact that if God had put P in C\* instead then P would have chosen differently.

Rather (and here's, I think, the answer to the so-what question), what the objection threatens to undermine, I think, is the theological utility of the doctrine of middle knowledge. If the objection is correct then the distinction between broadly logically possible worlds and worlds that are feasible for God becomes inconsequential because God can bring about whatever creaturely free choices he wants to without detriment to his providential plan. Therefore the Molinist account of providence would be useless in explaining why apparently less than optimal states of affairs obtain in the world (for example, evil and sin in the world). The Molinist would have to say (like the Calvinist) that these less than optimal states of affairs are just God's perfect will – that it is his will that a world of sin and evil and suffering exists. So the Molinist account then would not be useful in explaining why these less than optimal states of affairs obtain. Like the Calvinist, he'd have to just say it's God's will. But the Molinist account would still enjoy the considerable advantage of making room for creaturely freedom. It just wouldn't be of much help in explaining, for example, why evil and suffering exist. But it would still provide a reconciliation of divine sovereignty with genuine human freedom.

But is the objection successful? Well, I think not because it's predicated upon a number of questionable assumptions. Let me identify some of these assumptions.

First, the objection seems to assume that we're dealing here with events that are distributed randomly by pure chance across the sets of circumstances. But it is not by chance that P would choose some action A in circumstances C. Rather, P acts for reasons in those circumstances. So we shouldn't think of P's choices as randomly distributed across the possible sets of circumstances. On the contrary, free choices are indeterminate events which are done for reasons. I think that gives good grounds for thinking that P's choices in C would not vary wildly if he were placed in C\* instead. This is the point that

someone earlier was just making. I think the reason would be is that for P circumstances  $C^*$  are indistinguishable from C, and therefore his reasons for choosing A in C would also apply for choosing A in  $C^*$  as well. Here's empirical evidence for that claim. Just ask the relevant person: Would you have chosen to do differently if a molecule in Alpha Centauri had been moved slightly to the left? I'm sure he will say, *No, I would have chosen exactly the same way*. I think that the objection fails because it assumes that our choices are like random events that do not occur for reasons when in fact free choices, though indeterminate, are done for reasons – reasons that if they hold in C would also hold in  $C^*$ .

Secondly, the objection assumes that the circumstances are unlimited. But if you think about it, this is far from obvious. It's universally agreed, for example, that events which are later than P's time of choosing ought not to be considered in the circumstances. When we say that P would choose something in circumstances C we mean at a time T. And events which are in the future aren't considered to be part of those circumstances. Why not? Simply because events which are future at the time of P's choice can have no influence on P's situation at T, and therefore they are just irrelevant to P's decision. But if you think about it, events which are sufficiently distant from P are just as irrelevant as future events if those events are simultaneous with or even earlier than time T.

If we imagine the event of P's choice, from P the fastest causal signals that can go out into the future will be a light signal. That's a limiting velocity for physical influences. The events which can causally impact P's choice will lie within a cone of light signals from prior events. Events which have what's called a space-like separation from P cannot have any impact on P's choice because they cannot send an influence that would affect P's choice. Any event that can affect P's choice will have to lie either inside or on this past light cone of P's decision at that point. But events which are space-like separated from P are just completely irrelevant to P's choice. They are as irrelevant as events that lie in P's absolute future. In fact, according to the special theory of relativity, for some observers at this point (those moving at near-light speeds), events in this space-like region are future for the observer at the place of P's choice. I think this suggests that if we do not consider future events to be part of the circumstances in which P decides, neither should we consider events having a space-like separation from P. Rather, the only events that should be included in C are events which are in or on P's past light cone. In that case the substitution of circumstances  $C^*$  for C will not affect the counterfactual in question since only the circumstances C in this light cone are relevant. What happens over here in some distant event in Alpha Centauri is simply irrelevant. It's not part of the circumstances C. So the circumstances in which a free agent makes a choice are a lot more limited than what the objector seems to assume. They're really limited only to those that are in this past light cone, and when you think that the universe had a beginning this past light cone



is not infinite. It's only about 13 or 14 billion years old. So this is a finite region that should be considered as part of those circumstances.

The third point is the objection assumes that imperceptible events included in P's past light cone can be altered without significant effects upon P's situation at T. The assumption would have to be that you could alter certain events in this past light cone and it really wouldn't make much difference (if any) to P's decision at time T. But the lesson of both quantum physics and of chaos theory have taught us that that assumption is false. Both of these show how imperceptible tiny changes can make enormous differences on the macro level. For example, the imperceptible quantum indeterminacy and the position of a cue ball on a billiard table is such that after only a dozen shots that indeterminacy will be magnified such that the ball could be anywhere on the table. Only a dozen shots are required to magnify that imperceptible indeterminacy in the ball's location to be as large as the whole billiard table. You wouldn't have any idea where it would be. Similarly, chaotic systems vary unpredictably with the smallest perturbation. You alter just a little thing (a butterfly's wings) and it can upset macroscopic events like hurricanes over the southern United States. Now, certainly it's true that some events in the past light cone – events that are very far away and very recent – might be alterable without a great impact upon P's decision at time T. But these will be, after all, finite in number, and it will be pure speculation as to whether or not manipulation of those events would lead P to freely choose differently than he will in fact choose. The available alterations may fall far short of what would be necessary for God to bring about any desired free choice on P's part.

Finally, the fourth objection to this view is that the objection assumes that God's concern is with P's choice alone – just with this one choice. But God's concern is with the whole history of free creatures on into eternity future. Even if substituting C\* for C were sufficient for bringing about a different free choice of P at T, that says nothing about the feasibility of actualizing a whole world of free creatures on into the infinite future – a task which I think plausibly would involve infinite complexity.

So it's not at all implausible that the difference between broadly logically possible worlds and worlds that are feasible for God would then become very significant and very dramatic.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* What sort of defenses do the people who give this kind of objection . . . surely they identified these sorts of assumptions and then give defenses for them, or do they?

*Dr. Craig:* I haven't seen . . . well, Zimmerman has responded to me. But his view is based upon a really peculiar understanding of human freedom that I think is just incorrect. As long as we think of libertarian freedom in terms of being free from external



causal constraints, I think on this account a person's decisions are free in both C\* and in C and therefore the claim by someone like Zimmerman that this destroys human freedom I think fails.

*Student:* It is also worth mentioning that in that book that I mentioned earlier, Randy also mentions the agent-causal-libertarian account, and I think Zimmerman has even conceded at this point that his account doesn't work.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. Good. Thank you.

## **END DISCUSSION**

This is by far the most sophisticated objection to a divine middle knowledge or Molinist account of providence, and I'm persuaded that it doesn't work. Therefore, I think that the Molinist reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom is the superior view of the three alternatives.

Not only does Molinism enjoy these theoretical advantages, but this past week it's come to my attention that Molinism also has significant practical advantages. I was sent a blog by one of our Reasonable Faith chapter directors entitled "Molinism Saves Marriages."<sup>35</sup> He tells this story.

. . . my wife and I used to fight about a certain subject all too often. . . . This issue that caused such tension between the two of us was regarding a theological issue: God's sovereignty and human freedom. That is to say, my wife held to a theological view known as Arminianism . . . — and I was a staunch Calvinist. . . .

Churches split over this debate and our fledgling relationship was on the rocks because of it too. This topic would arise constantly and it seemed as if every night we would go get our Bibles, not to grow closer to God, but to use them as weapons against each other! She had her proof texts and I had mine. . . .

We would have yelling fights that would lead to tears. In retrospect, I was a total jerk, but I figured that God had causally determined me to be a jerk and that He was forcing me to act that way for some reason, unbeknownst to me. . . .

We eventually decided to sweep this problem under the rug and we got married despite being unequally yoked with theological differences. However, the problem remained. . . .

Deep down, however, I actually questioned her salvation, as I could not understand why God would not force her to believe the truth, as I was confident He did with me. . . .

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35 <http://freethinkingministries.com/molism-saves-marriages/> (accessed August 24, 2018).

After several years of not talking about this issue God finally intervened, at the same time I started studying Christian apologetics. Ironically, a Calvinistic pastoral colleague of mine introduced me to the work of William Lane Craig. . . .

Pretty soon, I stumbled upon the doctrines of “middle knowledge” and “Molinism.” . . .

It soon occurred to me that the dichotomy between Calvinism and Arminianism is a false one. That is to say, there is at least one other possible option to consider: Molinism. . . .

Molinism “clicked” and made sense to me. . . .

It has been several years since I parted ways with Calvin. My wife and I are both advocates of Molinism today and our marriage is flourishing. Rarely a week goes by, however, that my wife does not lovingly remind me that she was right and I was wrong about the faults of TULIP Calvinism. . . .

Bottom line: Molinism saves marriages!

Well, we can be very grateful for that practical advantage. I would just remind the author of the blog here that his wife shouldn't gloat over her triumph because she was equally wrong about Arminianism, and it was only by making a mutual compromising coming to the center that they arrived at a compatible view on which they could be happily married. So I rejoice with them and that practical outcome of Molinism.<sup>36</sup>

## Lecture 13: The Collapse of the Belief in 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 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 between what I call a special providence and a miracle. On a Molinist view, God can, via his middle knowledge, arrange for extraordinary acts which would otherwise be highly improbable coincidences to occur by knowing what free agents would do in any circumstance he might put them in. An ordinary special providence. For example, when the nation of Israel wants to cross the Jordan River, just as they come to the Jordan a landslide occurs upstream blocking the river so that they're able to cross through on the dry riverbed. This was not 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 by contrast 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 as well 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 businessman to make him hire you which would involve God's miraculous intervention. But what God could do is have a special providence whereby he arranges for a person to be in those circumstances where he freely would hire you. And that you can have the faith to pray for. 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.

Let's then go on to look at the problem about miracles. First let's look at the scriptural data concerning miracles. 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 also they 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 where God uses miraculous acts to authenticate the truth of his prophets' message and his existence. 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 message and the proclamation of Jesus and his being a special revelation from God. So clearly I think people in the ancient world were able to distinguish between the standard events that would 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.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Has there been any thought or analysis given to why there are such gaps in the Bible and miracles? Like you were saying, there are certain instances and then nothing happens for hundreds of years.

*Dr. Craig:* That's right.

*Student:* So has anybody ever thought about why that might be?

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, yes. There is much discussion of that. As you rightly point out, we shouldn't think that people in the ancient times experienced miracles on a regular sort of basis – that these were ongoing events. Rather, as I indicated, they tend to cluster around the Exodus and around Elijah and Elisha, and then around Jesus. I think it's evident that the miraculous acts of God are accompaniments of moments of tremendous divine revelation whereby the miraculous acts are given as an attestation or confirmation of the truth of the message that the prophet proclaimed. So Moses in delivering the people from Israel is ratified by these tremendous miraculous acts that God performs for Israel to deliver them. Similarly with Elijah and Elisha. And then of course Jesus as God's Son is attended with a host of miracles that serve to vindicate his claim that in his person the kingdom of God is breaking into human history. The miracles were intended to be signs that this was happening. So I think that for most of human history – even most of Israel's history, as you say – there would be no miracles. It was just life as ordinary, but then there would be these special moments of divine revelation or action that would be attended by miracles.

*Student:* What scholars of antiquity would claim that people in the ancient world never made this distinction?

*Dr. Craig:* Oddly enough, this is a claim that's made by modern scholars. For example, John Walton. I was just reading his book this week – *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* – where he makes this assertion. It just seems to me to be patently false that these ancient peoples couldn't discern an extraordinary miraculous act of God from what ordinarily happens. I think, for example, of Jesus saying when he says, *Are figs gathered from grapes or thorns from thistles?* They knew that one type of vegetation gives rise to the

same type. They had an understanding of the course of nature – the regular way in which the world worked. I haven't seen anything from the ancient world that would suggest this.

*Student:* Along the lines of what you're saying, when Moses was first called he said, *How will I verify who I'm sent from?* And God gave him specific miracles to do. There wouldn't have been any reason to say this is going to give you credibility before Pharaoh if those things were not considered miraculous.

*Dr. Craig:* Exactly. And when the snake that Moses' rod turns into eats up the snake of the sorcerers' in Pharaoh's court, that's obviously meant to show that Moses is the one doing genuine miracles wrought by God. So, yes, good example.

*Student:* It seems like there are some cases where you can't tell if God is intervening to break the laws of nature, so to say, or he's taking advantage of natural events. Like in Genesis 22 when Abraham is told to sacrifice his son Isaac and they're going up on the mountain and Isaac says, *Where's the sacrifice?*, and Abraham says, *God will provide.* They get up there, and Abraham's hand is stopped, and they turn around and there's a ram caught in the thicket. Anybody passing by would say a ram is caught in a thicket – there's no miracle there. But is that special intervention or is that just an ordinary event?

*Dr. Craig:* I see that as a special providence that I was talking about. God knew that if he set up these circumstances a ram would get caught in the thicket on the top of Mount Moriah where Abraham was commanded to go to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. I gave the example, as well, from the Old Testament of the people crossing the Jordan River and a landslide occurs which blocks the river – a purely natural event, not a sort of miraculous intervention. So you're right – in cases of special providence we probably won't know if there was miraculous intervention or not because this would be hidden from us but it would seem that in many cases there just doesn't need to be a sort of divine supernatural intervention. Another example would be when Paul and Silas are in prison in the book of Acts and an earthquake occurs which springs open the doors so that they're able to just walk out. Did God miraculously cause the earthquake, or did the earthquake just occur at that time through a special providence of God? God did not just spring the doors miraculously. It was through this earthquake that the prison doors were sprung and Paul and Silas were able to leave.

*Student:* It occurs to me that the book of Daniel is probably the biggest example of out-and-outright miracles. A fiery furnace, and they're all walking around in it. It apparently killed the guards it was so hot when they opened the door.

*Dr. Craig:* I don't mean to imply that there are not miracles outside of the ones that I mentioned, but I think the supreme miracle in the Old Testament is the Exodus. That's the central event of the Old Testament, and the resurrection of Jesus in the New. But obviously there are other miraculous acts of God.

## END DISCUSSION

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. The traditional belief in miracles held by the church collapsed during the 19th century. I want to say a word about what led to the collapse of belief in miracles in the modern age.

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 the belief of the reliability of the Gospel stories of miracles in German theology.

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 17th and early 18th century were willing, indeed sometimes they were 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.

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. Strauss rejected both the conspiracy theory of the deists as well as the natural explanation school (or apparent death theory) 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>37</sup> If you're an enlightened person then you'll recognize that this 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

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37 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.

without a perception of the inviolability of the chain of finite clauses and of the impossibility of miracles.”<sup>38</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 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>39</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>40</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 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

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38 Ibid., 75.

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

40 Ibid., 11 0-11.

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. This mythological approach still lingers on in left-wing radical circles like the so-called Jesus Seminar, but 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-working however you might want to go on to explain these. Jesus was a healer and 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.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* What do you do when a miracle happens to you? That question appears in the book of Acts in the story of Paul who was a firm believer that the new church was absolutely wrong, and he went out after Jesus with both feet. And then something happened, and he changed. That's why I say: what do you do when it happens to you? All of these explanations don't mean anything to the blind man who was healed. They don't do anything at all. He just says *I was blind, now I see*.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, and Paul would be a good example of someone who came to faith in Christ through a miraculous event in his life. I think Thomas would be another when he sees Jesus appear in the upper room and falls to his feet and says, *My Lord and My God!* I think you're quite right that miracles can be a source of faith in Christ, but they're not coercive interestingly enough. Many people saw the miracles Jesus did and did not believe. Their hearts were hardened and they didn't respond. So miracles are no guarantee of faith in Christ, but we do have examples of where people have come to a knowledge of Christ through miraculous acts.

*Student:* I have a question about what seems like it's been, I don't know if it started later, but Leslie Weatherhead for an example. It seems like you find a lot of writings that they will take these miracles and they will find ways to explain them that influence a lot of people. Such as the old practice of the priest wanting to bring about the Messiah and they

would have these young girls that they found spotless and they would come in to the priest. It basically stopped before . . . or stopped the practice. But many people have (like Leslie Weatherhead) have written about when Mary visited Zacharias and Elizabeth was pregnant and she comes back three months later and she's pregnant, or that the leaves along the Nile . . . scientists are . . . it falls in the water and the water turns a reddish color so that explains it. It seems like there's so much writing on those kind of things that as a regular person I have . . . I mean, I know I'm not to be true because of faith, but I don't know how to research it . . .

*Dr. Craig:* I am not familiar with the author that you mentioned, but it would seem that with the waning of skepticism concerning the miracles of Jesus in particular that the old natural explanation school would also seem to then require revivification because if you're going to admit that Jesus did these things then you need to explain them away somehow. But I suspect that the explanations offered by people like the man you mentioned are just as brittle and unconvincing as the German rationalists of the 18th century who came up with the most bizarre and wild explanations for the miracles of Jesus. So I doubt it presents a serious alternative.

*Student:* Don't you think society is coming up with a lot of writings to explain away Jesus? It seems to be going up.

*Dr. Craig:* Let me say this. I think that what the lesson this morning illustrates is the huge chasm that exists between scholarship and popular culture. I think probably most of us have never even heard of the men that I mentioned this morning, and yet they are absolute keys in the history of New Testament scholarship about the life of Jesus and the Gospels. You are quite right that on the Internet and in popular culture and popular level books which aim to sell copies and make money you got people like a Dan Brown and others who can make millions by concocting these bizarre sorts of theories. But they're not taken seriously by scholarship. You won't find these theories being discussed seriously at, say, the Society of Biblical Literature's annual convention or you won't find these people reading papers there.

*Student:* It seems like so many people like *The Shack*. People talk about it all the time. They talk about universalism. The ordinary people seem to be greatly influenced.

*Dr. Craig:* Exactly. I think that's because the ordinary person in popular culture is unfamiliar with where critical scholarship is with regard to the historical Jesus, and so you have these debates being rehearsed on the popular level that have really been laid to rest in the 18th century like these natural explanations and so forth. As I say, it could well be that these will have a resurgence of interest, but I am very, very skeptical that they will be any more plausible today than they were in the 18th century.

*Student:* As you said, there's a waning of the denial of miracles – correct? – as such, is that what you said earlier? That miracles being supernatural are now considered factual among scholars?

*Dr. Craig:* What I said was that it is thought that Jesus did carry out a ministry of miracle-working and exorcisms; that this is not the influence of mythology on the traditions or on the evangelists that had nothing to do with Greco-Roman mythology. These were rather historical reminiscences of the man Jesus of Nazareth and the kind of ministry he had. He had a reputation as a faith healer and exorcist.

*Student:* So there was no myth to that effect. I understand. But the scholars today – are they still perpetuating the concept there was, in fact, a natural explanation still? Or are the scholars (both those that are liberal and however you want to describe them) accepting that these are, in fact, supernatural events?

*Dr. Craig:* No. As I say, they wouldn't accept them as supernatural events. I think that most of them will remain agnostic. They will say as historians it is not within our purview to judge the miraculous character of an event. We have no way of knowing. So all we can say is the event occurred, but we're not in a position to judge as to its supernatural cause. So, with respect to the resurrection of Jesus, as we saw when we discussed that, the wide majority of New Testament scholars including Jewish scholars admit the fundamental facts regarding what happened to Jesus – that he was crucified, that his body was then laid in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea, that that tomb was discovered empty by a group of his women followers on the Sunday morning after the crucifixion, that thereafter different individuals and groups experienced appearances of Jesus alive, and that the earliest disciples suddenly and sincerely came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead despite every predisposition to the contrary. Those facts are widely acknowledged. Unlike Strauss, contemporary scholars do not say those are the result of the influence of Greco-Roman mythology on the writers and the tradition. These are facts that characterize the fate of Jesus of Nazareth. This is what happened. But if you ask them, *How do you explain those facts?*, they will typically back off and say, *I don't know*. Something happened. Sometimes these scholars will say something enormously impactful, enormously significant, must have happened to explain this, but I don't know what it was.

*Student:* But there are some, like Bart Ehrman, that would say what happened is it was a vision when Christ . . . even though he may hesitate – *I wasn't there* – but *I can't explain what is logical or rational to explain what happened*. So he would volunteer that it was a vision and that's how the whole Christian response began – was through that.

*Dr. Craig:* Ehrman tends to be more agnostic about these things. He says as a historian you can't investigate supernatural activity. So he tends to be one of those who will back

off and say *I'm just agnostic*. An example of someone who would defend the hallucination explanation is Gerd Lüdemann, the German scholar who says that Peter and Paul both suffered guilt complexes – one for having denied Jesus, and the other for persecuting the church and being unable to fulfill the demands of the Jewish law – and that they psychologically projected visions of Jesus as a result of these guilt complexes. So Lüdemann would be an example of the old natural explanation school. He does offer a natural explanation.

*Student:* And Bart Ehrman, I think, does, too.

*Dr. Craig:* No, Ehrman is really agnostic. He says this is outside the province of the historian to talk about the cause of the event. But in any case, this school of thinking – the hallucination hypothesis – hasn't generated much of a following. Lüdemann holds to it, some others no doubt, but it's not one that has attracted many followers. I think the majority who don't believe in the resurrection would just say, *I'm agnostic about it; I don't know what happened*.

## **END DISCUSSION**

All right, with that we come to the end of our lesson for today.<sup>41</sup>

## Lecture 14: Arguments Against Miracles

The roots of the 19th century collapse in the belief in miracles among biblical theologians lay in the 18th century and even earlier. The skepticism of modern man with regard to miracles arose during the Enlightenment, or the so-called Age of Reason, which dawned in Europe in the 17th century. The attack upon miracles was led by the Deists. Deists believed in the existence of God as well as his conservation of the world in being and his general revelation in nature, but they denied that he had revealed himself in any special way in the world. They were therefore very exercised to demonstrate the impossibility of the occurrence of miracle, or at least of the identification of miracle. They were, in turn, countered by a barrage of Christian apologetic literature defending the possibility and evidential value of miracle. Today we want to examine some of the principal arguments used by the Deists against miracles.

First, the Newtonian world-machine. Although the most important philosophical opponents of the belief in miracles were Benedict de Spinoza and David Hume, much of the debate was conducted against the backdrop of the mechanical worldview of Newtonian physics. Isaac Newton in his *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica*, or *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (that is to say, of science – in the 17th century and 18th century science was called natural philosophy). Newton's treatise published in 1687 was on the mathematical principles of natural philosophy. By explaining the world in terms of his famous three laws of motion together with some definitions, Newton was able to deduce the corollaries and theorems of his physics. By treating the world in terms of masses, motions, and forces operating according to these laws, the need for God's providence seemed to be eliminated by Newton's physics, and it gave rise to a picture of the universe that has been appropriately characterized as the Newtonian world-machine.

Newton's model of mechanical explanation was enthusiastically received as the paradigm for explanation in all fields. This attitude was epitomized by the claim of the French scientist Pierre Simone de Laplace that a supreme intelligence equipped with Newton's *Principia* and with knowledge of the present position and velocity of every particle in the universe could predict the exact state of the universe at any other point in time. When the Emperor Napoleon remarked to Laplace on the failure to mention God anywhere in his treatise, a non-plussed Laplace retorted, "Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis."<sup>42</sup> This worldview promoted the Deist conception of God as the creator of the world-machine who wound it up like a clock and set it running under the laws of matter and motion, never to interfere with it again.

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42 For an account of this famous exchange see Roger Hahn, *Pierre Simon Laplace 1749-1827: A Determined Scientist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 172.



In fact, this harmoniously functioning world-machine was thought to provide the best evidence for the existence of God. The 18th century French *philosophe* Denis Diderot exclaimed, “Thanks to the work of these great men, the world is no longer a God, it is a machine with its wheels, its chords, its pulleys, its springs, and its weights.”<sup>43</sup> But it was equally thought that this world system also made it incredible that God should interfere with the operation of this world-machine via miraculous interventions. Diderot’s contemporary Voltaire said that it was absurd and insulting to God to think that he would interrupt the operations of what he called “this immense machine” since God designed it from the beginning to run according to his divinely decreed, immutable laws.<sup>44</sup> For these 18th century Newtonians, such miraculous interventions could only be described as violations of the laws of nature and therefore were impossible.

Let’s turn to our first philosophical figure which is Benedict de Spinoza. The philosophical attack upon miracles actually preceded Newton’s *Principia*. The philosopher Benedict de Spinoza in his work *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (or *Theological-Political Treatise*), published in 1670, argued against both the possibility of miracles and the evidential value of miracles. Two of Spinoza’s arguments, I think, are of special significance for our discussion.

First, he argued that miracles violate the unchangeable order of nature. Spinoza argues that nothing happens contrary to the eternal and unchangeable order of nature. He maintains that all that God wills is characterized by eternal necessity and truth. For there is no difference between God’s understanding and his will, so it’s the same thing to say that God knows a thing or to say that God wills a thing. The same necessity that characterizes God’s knowledge also characterizes his will. Therefore, the laws of nature flow from the necessity and the perfection of the divine nature. If some event contrary to these natural laws could occur, then the divine will and knowledge would stand in contradiction to nature, which is impossible. To say that God does something contrary to the laws of nature is to say that God does something contrary to his own nature. Therefore, miracles are impossible.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* What did they believe about the theory of chaos and possible potential?

*Dr. Craig:* OK. Good point. That question actually would have been more appropriately posed with respect to the Newtonian world-machine. She’s saying, *What about chaos theory?*, which suggests that certain macroscopic systems like the weather or insect

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<sup>43</sup> Denis Diderot, “Philosophical Thoughts,” in *Diderot’s Philosophical Works*, trans. M. Jourdain (Chicago: Open Court, 1916), p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> *A Philosophical Dictionary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), s.v. “Miracles,” by Marie Francois Arouet de Voltaire.

populations are inherently unpredictable. The simple answer is: during this time they didn't know about that. This is extremely early on, as I say, 17th century physics. We'll say something later about contemporary physics and how that affects the view of the world as a Newtonian world-machine. But at this time they were unaware of these factors.

*Student:* I'm wondering – were there Thomastic influences going on? Because when I hear two things are identical, the first thing I think is . . .

*Dr. Craig:* You know, I think that's a perceptive remark. Let me explain what he means by this. Spinoza was a pantheist. He thought that God and nature are identical. So in one sense, of course to violate the laws of nature is to violate God's own nature because for Spinoza nature and God are co-terminous – they are the same reality. But as you, I think, sees, the *Tractatus* is not a pantheistic work. It's from the early work of Spinoza and is really a deistic work. Here he seems to be appealing to the traditional concept of God and the doctrine of divine simplicity which says that God's knowledge is his will and is his essence which would mean that the will of God would be characterized by the same sort of necessity as the divine essence. I do think you're right that this does seem to stick behind this objection. He's using here a sort of classical or medieval concept of God which would identify all of God's attributes with his essence and therefore think of them as necessary, whereas for persons who don't hold to that doctrine God's knowledge of the world as well as his will for this world is contingent. God could have created other worlds in which case he would have different knowledge and different will. So I think you're right that this Thomastic doctrine of divine simplicity seems to lodge somewhere behind this objection by Spinoza.

*Student:* Accordingly, would it also be correct to say that they adhere to a constituent sort of ontology as opposed to a relational one going on?

*Dr. Craig:* This is really getting into the weeds now. It seems to me that on the Thomastic view (that is, Thomas Aquinas' view) he doesn't think of God as composed in any way. Rather God just is his act of existence. For every contingent thing there is an ontological composition. There's the essence (which is the essential nature of a thing) and there is the act of being that instantiates that essence and makes a real concrete object. But in God's case, for St. Thomas, in one sense God has no essence. He simply is the act of being subsisting. God is the pure act of being. Now, if you find that difficult to grasp, join the club! Thomists tend to admit that this is unintelligible because we only grasp things by grasping their essence or their nature, and we can have no conception therefore of the pure act of being. So this view of Aquinas leads to a sort of profound agnosticism about God. We really only can say what God is not, not what he is. But to draw our attention back to Spinoza again, lest we get too far afield, Spinoza does seem to want to say that

God's will and hence the laws of nature that he wills are characterized with the same sort of necessity that his knowledge is and that these are the same as his essence.

*Student:* It seems to me, and in the last couple of years I've had quite a bit of experience with it, in talking to the doctors they have now come up with a term for it – it's called spontaneous remission. That is to say, we don't know why it happened or what had happened, it just disappeared. It seems to me that is more threatening to the concept of God than any of these others were. They're just basically saying it is a universal part that these things happen - that doesn't indicate God.

*Dr. Craig:* Right, and we will see in just a moment that Spinoza makes this very point, so this objection has been around for a long time. I'll say something about that in the next section.

*Student:* Even if what Spinoza assumed – that it's God's will and everything – without claiming to know all of God's will, you can't know that's not true (that there cannot be miracles). There's more of God's attributes than you know. It is all embedded in his will. But we are judging God by saying we know enough and he can't do that.

*Dr. Craig:* Interesting point. This is a point that some of these 18th and 19th century apologists made in response to Spinoza. They said the miracles can be willed by God just as much as the laws. They can all be expressions of his immutable will – the exceptions as well as the rules. So the argument fails to show that miracles could not occur.

*Student:* Do these people just not believe in free will? Because it seems like if there was free will then humans could effectively mess up the machine that God worked so hard to put into place.

*Dr. Craig:* That's a very good point. This would be a kind of deterministic view of the world in which human beings are so complicated that we can't predict what they're going to do. But nevertheless, as Laplace said, if we knew the precise position and velocity of every particle in the universe (including every particle in a person's brain and nervous system) then given the laws of nature we could predict exactly what he's going to do. It's simply the complexity that makes it inaccessible to us. Someone like Spinoza was also a determinist. So you're quite right about that, I think, in saying that this would deny not simply miracles but freedom of the will.

*Student:* Back on the machine that we were talking about earlier – how do modern theists rectify the sort of Copenhagen interpretation?

*Dr. Craig:* Again, that's related to the question concerning chaos theory. I'll say something about that when we get to the assessment part and respond to this argument. Contemporary physics in a couple of different respects is much less deterministic than Newtonian physics was.

*Student:* There's a good five minutes with Ravi Zacharias getting a question at the University of Michigan about this where the criticism that was couched in the question was that Christians were deterministic because of God's sovereignty ultimately. He turned that around by saying, *Well, are you determined to come and ask the question that you asked and to be here?* So it turned out that from the materialistic point of view they were much more the determinist than the Christian was.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, I think that's quite right. If you're a physicalist, determinism is going to be more difficult to ward off than if you're a dualist who believes that there is a soul that is united with the body but nevertheless distinct from it and able to have a causal influence upon the body.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let me move on at this point to the next argument by Spinoza, and that is to say that miracles are in any case insufficient to prove God's existence. Spinoza believed that a proof of God's existence must be absolutely certain. It is by the unchangeable order of nature that we know that God exists. By admitting miracles, Spinoza warns, we break the laws of nature and this will create doubts then about the existence of God thus leading us right into the arms of atheism. So he thought that miracles would actually promote atheism because it would lead us to doubt the unchangeable order of nature's laws.

Spinoza also develops two sub-points under this objection. First, a miracle would not in any case prove God's existence because a lesser being such as an angel or a demon could be the cause of the event. The second sub-point is that a so-called miracle is simply a work of nature not yet discovered by man. Our knowledge of nature's laws is limited, and just because *we* cannot explain the cause of a particular event doesn't imply that it is a miracle having God as its supernatural cause. One might say in a case of a supposedly miraculous healing it was just a spontaneous remission of the disease. It has a natural explanation, but our knowledge is too limited for us to know what it is.

This objection to the identification of miracles has come to be known as the god-of-the-gaps objection. This is the notion that it's illegitimate to appeal to God to plug up the gaps in our scientific knowledge because the explanation could always be some as-yet-undiscovered aspect of the natural world. And as those gaps are progressively closed with the advance of science, God gets squeezed out of nature. Therefore, the god-of-the-gaps is almost universally vilified today. One should not use God simply as a stopgap for scientific ignorance.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Am I making this too simplistic? Was this a confusion between how and why at this stage – this is the 1600s?

*Dr. Craig:* I think I understand the question. The “how” question might be, “Did the cancer actually disappear that was detected?” The “why” question would be, “Why did the cancer disappear?” Was it the result of miraculous action or was it just a spontaneous remission? Was it just a scientific anomaly? I think that that is a legitimate distinction. Sometimes you could establish that an event occurred, but you wouldn't know whether or not it was miraculous because you're not sure if there might not be some unknown natural cause for it. So that's why I say that when the Deists could not prove that miracles are impossible they would content themselves with saying that a miracle is unidentifiable. Spinoza argues against both, doesn't he? The first argument he gives is that miracles are impossible, but this second argument is that a miracle, even if it occurred, would not be identifiable because it could always be the product of an unknown natural cause. That's sort of this distinction between perhaps what and why something occurs.

*Student:* The argument against god-of-the-gaps is that God is a better explanation for what we do know, not for what we don't know. If the critic says, *Well, what happens is a scientific anomaly*, that itself is a gap theory.

*Dr. Craig:* I think it is in a sense appealing to a kind of naturalism-of-the-gaps. We'll get into these sorts of questions later when we come to the assessment of these objections. I'm going to respond to all of these objections, but for now we want to at least just get them on the table.

*Student:* I've heard some people equate the universe existing as a miracle itself. Would that put it in Spinoza's view on a different level of existence than a miracle? How could he explain creation *ex nihilo*?

*Dr. Craig:* In what sense do these folks mean that the universe itself is a miracle?

*Student:* I guess essentially “inexplicable” like something coming from nothing or not explicable through modern science.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. I think that an argument like the *Kalam* cosmological argument (whatever begins to exist has a cause; the universe began to exist; therefore the universe has a cause) just is an argument for miracles writ large. It is taking the universe, as you say, as the product of a supernatural cause, and so I think that's quite right. The fine-tuning argument as well; that the initial constants and quantities of nature seemed to have been improbably fine-tuned for the existence of embodied intelligent life like ourselves cries out for a supernatural explanation. I think you're right. The argument for miracles needn't concern particular events within history but can have a kind of universal scope – the origin of the universe itself, the fine-tuning of the universe, could be taken to be arguments for the existence of God from miracles.

*Student:* Did Spinoza ever come to realize later and is like pantheism that his argument for total determinism removes all guilt of sin and free will?

*Dr. Craig:* I do not know what Spinoza thought about sin, so I can't answer that question. But, as I say, he was a pantheist and determinist, and that would seem to be incompatible with moral responsibility, wouldn't it?

## **END DISCUSSION**

Alright, let's then move to our next figure in this debate which is the Scottish skeptic and philosopher David Hume. In 1748, Hume published his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* which includes a chapter called "Of Miracles." While Spinoza had attacked the possibility of the *occurrence* of a miracle, Hume attacked the possibility of the *identification* of a miracle. He presents a sort of two-pronged attack upon the identification of miracles which we could characterize as an "even if . . . but in fact . . ." argument; that is to say, in the first part of the argument he argues on the basis of certain concessions that he's willing to grant, but then in the second part of the argument he argues on the basis of what he thinks is in fact the case. We can refer to this first argument as his "in principle" argument and the second half of the argument as his "in fact" argument.

Let's look first at the "in principle" argument. Here Hume maintains that it is impossible in principle to prove that a miracle has occurred. A wise man, he says, proportions his belief to the evidence. If the evidence makes a conclusion virtually certain, then we may call this a "proof," and the wise man will give whole-hearted assent to that conclusion. If the evidence makes a conclusion simply more likely than not, then we may speak of a "probability," and the wise man will accept the conclusion with a degree of confidence that is proportionate to the probability. Now, Hume argues, *even if* we concede that the evidence in favor of a particular miracle amounts to a *full proof*, it is still impossible in principle to identify that event as a miracle. Why? Because standing opposed to this proof is an equally full proof, namely the evidence for the unchangeable laws of nature, and that is a proof that the event in question is not a miracle.

Hume seems to imagine a scale in which the evidence is being weighed. On one side of the scale is the evidence for a particular miracle and (he's willing to concede for the sake of argument) that the evidence for that miracle amounts to a full proof. But on the other side of the scale is the evidence of all the people of all the ages for the regularity of the laws of nature, which also amounts to a full proof. Thus he writes,

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, a proof against miracle, from the very



nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.<sup>45</sup>

So proof stands against proof, and the scales are evenly balanced. Since the evidence doesn't incline in either direction, the wise man cannot hold to a miracle with any degree of confidence.

Indeed, Hume says, in order to prove that a miracle has taken place one would have to show that it would be an even *greater* miracle for the testimony in support of the event to be false. So with regard to the resurrection, Hume asks, which would be the greater miracle: that a man should rise from the dead or that the witnesses should be deceived or try to deceive?<sup>46</sup> He leaves no doubt as to his answer: he asserts that even if all historians agreed that on January 1, 1600, Queen Elizabeth publicly died and was buried and her successor installed on the throne, but that a month later she reappeared, resumed the throne, and ruled England for three more years, Hume says he would not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. He would accept the most extraordinary hypothesis for her pretended death and burial rather than admit so striking a violation of the laws of nature. Thus, even if the evidence for a miracle constituted a full proof, the wise man should not believe in miracles.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* What is the actual definition of the word “miracle?”

*Dr. Craig:* Ah, OK! You are putting your finger on the very pulse of the question. For these Deists and Newtonians, a miracle is defined as a violation of the laws of nature. That's going to be critical, I think, in assessing whether miracles are possible. We'll come back to that. But the way they define it, as we saw with Voltaire and we see with Hume, a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.

*Student:* How does the American Standard Dictionary define it today?

*Dr. Craig:* I haven't looked.

*Student:* If they define a miracle as something that just violates the natural laws of nature, how do they know that it's a violation of the laws and not them misunderstanding the laws?

*Dr. Craig:* That's kind of related to Spinoza's objection, isn't it? If some event occurs which appears to be in violation of nature's laws, he would say rather than admit that a miracle has occurred you just failed to formulate the law correctly. It really is a natural event, and the occurrence of something like that would just force you to revise the law to

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45 David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 10.1.90

46 David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, “Of Miracles”, Part II



take account of it. So if the laws of nature are just inductive generalizations of whatever happens in the world then it's by definition impossible that there could be a violation of the laws of nature. Miracles are ruled out by definition because as inductive generalizations of whatever happens, if something really happens then the laws of nature need to be revised to accommodate it.

*Student:* Doesn't that logic seem a little circular though?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes! Yes, it does. You're just defining miracles in such a way as to render them impossible, to rule them out. Quite right.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let me say something to conclude about Hume's in-fact argument. We've seen he argues that even if the evidence for a miracle amounts to a full proof, the wise man will not believe in miracles. But, in fact, says Hume, the evidence for miracles does not amount to a full proof. Indeed, the evidence is so poor, it doesn't even amount to a probability. Therefore, the decisive weight falls on the side of the scale containing the full proof for the regularity of nature, a weight which is so heavy that no evidence for a miracle could ever hope to counter-balance it.

Hume gives four reasons why in fact the evidence for miracles is negligible. First, no miracle in history is attested by a sufficient number of educated and honest men, who are of such social standing that they would have a great deal to lose by lying. Secondly, people crave the miraculous and will believe the most absurd stories as the abundance of false tales of miracles proves. Third, miracles occur only among barbarous peoples. Finally, number four, miracles occur in all religions and thereby cancel each other out, since they support contradictory doctrines. For those four reasons Hume concludes that the evidence for miracles is not even a probability.

He concludes that miracles can never be the foundation for any system of religion. "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason," pontificates Hume, all the while laughing up his sleeve. He says,

. . . the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, it's a miracle that anybody could be stupid enough to believe in Christianity!

What we'll do next time is have some assessment of these arguments. These arguments of Spinoza and Hume are still very much at the center of contemporary discussions of miracles. For example, the New Testament critic, Bart Ehrman, basically repeats warmed-over versions of Hume's argument against miracles as the reason that he thinks no proof or evidence of the resurrection of Jesus is possible. He does so, I think, without ever having read Hume himself. So these arguments continue to be of contemporary relevance and will merit our discussion next time.<sup>48</sup>

## 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 DISCUSSION<sup>49</sup>**

## Lecture 16: Rebutting Spinoza's Objections to Miracles

The last time we looked at an assessment of the Newtonian world-machine and the challenge that that posed for belief in miracles. Today I want to turn to the objections of Benedict de Spinoza.

You'll remember that Spinoza's first objection to the occurrence of miracles was his objection based upon the immutability of nature. It would be tempting to simply dismiss Spinoza's objection on the grounds that he was a pantheist, for whom the terms "God" and "Nature" were synonymous terms. He would use the expression, in Latin, *Deus sive Natura*, "God or Nature." So, of course, miracles would be impossible on a pantheistic view – a violation of the laws of nature would be a violation of God's nature because they are identical. The question is not whether miracles would be possible on a pantheistic view, but whether they would be possible on a theistic view.

But such a refutation of Spinoza would be far too easy. The *Tractatus* where this objection is to be found is a deistic, not a pantheistic, work, and Spinoza presupposes the traditional understanding of God. In particular, his argument is based upon the classic doctrine of divine simplicity which states that God's knowledge, will, goodness, power, and so forth are all really identical and one with his essence. The question that Spinoza raises, in effect, is if God's knowledge is identical to God's will then how can God's knowledge be necessary and his will be contingent? They cannot have different properties since they are the same.

Contrary to Spinoza, classical theology did not claim that God's knowledge is characterized by necessity. For example, God knows the truth "The universe exists." But this knowledge is not necessary to God. God was under no obligation to create the universe. Since creation is a free act, he could have refrained from creating anything at all, and if God had not created the world then he would instead know the truth "No universe exists." So, necessarily, whatever God knows is true; but it is not necessary that the content of God's knowledge be what it is. If God had created a different world or even no world at all, then the content of his knowledge would be different. Therefore, just as God is free to will differently than he does, he is able to have different knowledge than he does.

It follows that the laws of nature, then, are not known by God necessarily because they depend upon God's will. Even if we hold that the laws of nature are necessary truths, God could have willed to create a different universe operating according to a different set of natural laws by creating things that have different natures from the things that he has created. By the same token, the miracles that God performs could have been willed by God just as eternally and immutably as the laws. There's just no reason to think that when

God causes a naturally impossible event that God's knowledge and will somehow come into conflict.

Having said that, Spinoza's objection does raise one important point, though. It's very difficult to see how God's knowledge, for example, can be contingent and yet be identical with his essence, which includes necessary existence. How can God be utterly simple if he is in some respects necessary and in other respects contingent? What this calls into question, however, is not the possibility of miracles, but the doctrine of divine simplicity. This is a doctrine which is fortunately extra-biblical and is rejected as incoherent by the majority of Christian philosophers today.<sup>50</sup> So I do not think that an objection to miracles based upon the strong doctrine of divine simplicity is one that is very troubling.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* I'm certain that I don't understand fully what I'm about to ask you, but are you familiar with the *ad intra* versus *ad extra* distinction that adherents of divine simplicity make?

*Dr. Craig:* I'm familiar with a distinction like that with regard to God's works and God's nature. The works that God does externally would be, for example, as miracles in the world, but the things that he does inwardly would be things like the procession of the divine persons – the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit. There's a claim that God's inner works are distinct but the outward ones are just all the result of a single action. I think the expression is *opera ad extra sunt indivisa, opera ad intra sunt divisa*. The inner works are divided – the procession of the Spirit is not the same as the beginning of the Son. But they think of his external works as undivided, as just the result of a simple action. Why do you raise that in this connection?

*Student:* I've talked with, for example, adherents of divine simplicity, and I've heard them appeal to that distinction in an attempt to circumvent . . .

*Dr. Craig:* I don't know how that would help because, as I say, on this schema the inner works – the *opera ad intra sunt divisa* – they are divided. So in implying that there is a fundamental distinction between begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit, that would seem to deny divine simplicity. I would think you would do quite the opposite and say that these inner works of God are not divided; that they're somehow one. But that's not the classical formulation because they don't want to have more than one Son. So the procession of the Spirit has to be different from the begetting of the Son or you would have siblings which they don't want to have. It's difficult for me to see how that would be of much help, quite honestly.



*Student:* I was going to ask for a definition of that – what is the simplistic nature? But after having that, it seems like simplicity defines that the internal works and external works are really one in the same.

*Dr. Craig:* Look at our discussion of the attributes of God in Defenders class which is probably now a couple of years ago. When we did the attributes of God we talked about divine simplicity, and those are on the Reasonable Faith website under the Defenders lessons. The doctrine of divine simplicity states that God does not have a plurality of properties – that his omnipotence is his omniscience and that his omniscience is his goodness and that his goodness is his timelessness. Now, that's very difficult to make sense of. It seems clear that omnipotence is a different property than moral goodness, but the doctrine of divine simplicity says that God doesn't have a multiplicity of properties. He just is simple and uncompounded. Then to make it even more difficult, it identifies all of these properties with his essence; that his essence is existence, for example. It just is the act of being. So this is a very, very difficult doctrine, and this seems to be what's presupposed by Spinoza in this objection. He's saying that if God's knowledge is his essence and is one with his existence, well, since God has necessary existence, his knowledge would be necessary and therefore his will would be necessary and therefore he could not break the laws of nature which are produced by his will. And I think we can just cut this argument off at the ankles by rejecting the doctrine of divine simplicity which is, as I say, an extra-biblical doctrine and one that I think is just rife with philosophical difficulties.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's turn, secondly, to Spinoza's objection based on the insufficiency of miracles. You remember that his second objection was that miracles are insufficient to prove the existence of God. As stated, the objection is simply irrelevant, for virtually all Christian theologians used miracles not as proofs of the existence of God, but rather as proof of God's action in the world. Miracles belong to the field or discipline called Christian evidences – not to natural theology, which is arguments for God's existence. On the basis of the arguments of natural theology (like the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments), natural theologians sought to prove that God exists. Then, on the basis of Christian evidences (such as fulfilled prophecy and miracles), they sought to show that the God whose existence had been proved by the arguments of natural theology had revealed himself decisively in Jesus Christ and that therefore Christian theism is true. Therefore, Spinoza was just attacking a straw man. Miracles were not part of natural theology. They weren't used to prove God's existence.

Nevertheless, the supporting reasoning of Spinoza's objection was, I think, relevant to the Christian's position. You'll remember that Spinoza's first sub-point was that a proof for

God must be absolutely certain. Since we infer God's existence from the immutable laws of nature, anything that casts doubt upon those laws thereby casts doubt upon God's existence. Now, two questionable assumptions seemed to underlie Spinoza's reasoning: first, he assumes that a proof of God's existence must be demonstratively certain; and second, he presupposes that God's existence is inferred from natural laws. But the Christian apologists of Spinoza's day denied both of those assumptions. The more empirically-minded of them held that a cogent argument for God's existence need not be demonstratively certain. One thinks, for example, in this connection of William Paley's famous argument for design – his watchmaker argument (as it has sometimes been called). While not reaching absolute certainty, Paley claimed that the argument makes it more plausible to believe in God than not. I think contemporary philosophers agree that if we were justified only in accepting conclusions that were proved with demonstrative certainty, then we should know very, very little indeed. So that first assumption, I think, is quite unjustified – that arguments for God's existence must be demonstratively certain. But what about that second assumption that God's existence is inferred from natural laws? Well, again, that assumption fails to take account of the fact that there are other arguments for God's existence which are not based on natural laws. For example, one of the Christian thinkers of this era, Samuel Clarke, shared Spinoza's concern for demonstrative certainty, but he nevertheless believed that the ontological and the cosmological arguments provided rational grounds for inferring God's existence. So even if natural laws were somehow rendered uncertain, for Clarke that would have no impact whatsoever upon his natural theology and would not call into question God's existence. So I don't think that either of these supporting assumptions that are underlying this first sub-point is true.

But is Spinoza's claim about the consequence of admitting miracles in fact true? He seems to think that the admission of a genuine miracle would overthrow the natural law that the miracle violates. Now, we've already seen that properly speaking miracles do not violate natural laws and so they do not cast doubt upon their truth. The natural laws, remember, include these *ceteris paribus* conditions such that if those conditions don't obtain then the law doesn't apply anymore, and therefore miracles do not violate natural laws. Now, maybe Spinoza would insist that if it were proven that some event occurred which under our current understanding of natural law is thought to be naturally impossible, then rather than admit that a miracle has happened we should instead revise the natural law so as to permit the natural occurrence of the event in question. Do you see the possible response here on Spinoza's part? He might say, *OK. Define miracles as naturally impossible events, but if you claim that one has occurred, what that forces you to do is just revise the natural law so as to be able to accommodate it and treat it as natural.* But I think that this would be mistaken. The admission of a genuine miracle does

not need to overthrow the general regularity of nature. As Richard Swinburne, the Oxford philosopher, points out, a natural law is not abandoned just because of one exception to it. The exception must occur repeatedly whenever the conditions for it are present. But if the event will not occur again under identical circumstances then the law will not be abandoned. A natural law will not be reformulated unless a new version would yield better predictability of future events without being more complicated than the original law. But if the new law doesn't do any better in predicting the phenomena and explaining the event in question, then the event will simply remain an unexplained exception to the natural law – an anomaly. Therefore, Spinoza's fear that miracles would somehow destroy the fabric of natural law seems to be unjustified. Rather than leading us into the arms of atheism, such exceptions to the natural laws could lead us to discern the action of God in the world at that point.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Just a point of clarification, when you use the term “demonstrative certainty” I think that can be a point where terms can get really conflated. You're talking about Cartesian certainty as opposed to psychological certainty.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. He is referring to the French philosopher Rene Descartes who embarked upon a skeptical experiment of trying to doubt everything that he had formerly believed, and anything that was possible to doubt Descartes would set it to the side. And so he doubted the existence of the external world, he doubted the existence of his own body, and finally attempted to achieve a body of indubitable truths that could then be built into a worldview that would include the existence of God. He thought that the ontological argument and the cosmological argument would give you the existence of God with this kind of absolute certainty. Spinoza and Descartes, as well as Clarke, all come out of this rationalist era where mathematics was taken to be the sort of paradigm and model for knowledge. Spinoza's later work, *The Ethics*, is built like a geometrical treatise. He begins with his axioms just like a geometrical discourse, and then he derives all of his theorems from these basic axioms. So this model of explanation was taken for mathematics, and he and Descartes felt that you had to have the sort of mathematical demonstrability for these foundational and most important truths.

*Student:* Right. And that would be distinct from, say, psychological certainty. A lot of people tend to conflate the two. They think if you have Cartesian certainty or something then you also have . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Well, now, wouldn't you say if you do have a demonstration of a conclusion and that demonstration is mathematically rigorous then that would give you psychological certainty. Would it not?

*Student:* I could imagine people being irrational about it, for example.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, I think what he's suggesting is that you would have certain sort of indubitable axioms or premises from which certain things logically follow, and therefore on pain of irrationality you're obligated to believe these conclusions. Spinoza felt that arguments for God's existence ought to be characterized by that sort of demonstrability.

*Student:* What would he do with something like Kurt Gödel . . . I don't think they're contemporary but Gödel's incompleteness theories about math? You don't have that certainty of certainties.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that you are raising a good point. Modern mathematicians, like the 20th century mathematician Kurt Gödel, showed that in fact there will be truths that we know to be true but which cannot be derived from a finite set of axioms, contrary to Spinoza's assumption and the assumptions of classical mathematics. So you're quite right that would be a further reason to call into question this model of knowledge and explanation.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's look at Spinoza's second sub-point – that miracles could not be used to prove the existence of God because perhaps a lesser being like an angel or a demon was responsible for the miraculous act. Again, this objection did not strike against most of the Christian apologists of that day because, again, they were not trying to prove the existence of God by miracles. Having proved God's existence by the arguments of natural theology or presupposing or assuming God's existence, they used miracles chiefly to show that *Christian* theism was true. The miracles showed God's intervention or action in the world. It wasn't used to prove God's existence.

Nevertheless, the Christian apologists were very concerned about how to show in any particular case that the miracle was divine rather than demonic. I think that their answer to this question constitutes one of the most important and enduring contributions to the discussion of miracles. They held that it is the doctrinal context in which the miracle occurs that makes it evident if the miracle is truly from God. In this way they drew attention to the religio-historical context in which the miracle occurs as the key to the interpretation of that miracle. I think that this is very significant because a miracle without a context is inherently ambiguous. I think that's the problem with Hume's example of the revivification of Queen Elizabeth. The event lacks any religious context and appears as a bald and unexplained anomaly. So one feels a good deal of sympathy for Hume's skepticism about the revivification of Queen Elizabeth. But how different it is with respect to the resurrection of Jesus! It occurs in the context of and as the climax to Jesus' own unparalleled life and teachings and it produced so profound an effect upon his followers that they called him Lord and proclaimed salvation for all men in his name. Therefore, I think that this event ought to give us serious pause, whereas the resuscitation

of Queen Elizabeth would only occasion perplexity. The religio-historical context is crucial to the interpretation of a miraculous event.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I question the Christian response claim that all miracles are the act of God. They're all within his sovereignty. But look at the miracles done in Egypt, and remember the magicians or whatever you call them. They weren't tricks. Because when they got to the point where they could not duplicate it, they said, *That is the God*. Remember, if you read the Hebrew, it says God told Moses, *I made you God to Pharaoh*. So they had the concepts of gods, but there's only one real God. Plus, I have experiences where I see, when I'm witnessing to people that . . . one lady has been, since she was a little kid, she's a Christian, having voices. You deal with them. They are all real spirit bodies that we're fighting against. God uses . . . remember when he sent . . . *I need a lying spirit to bring this cane to go into battle so he can die*. Remember when God did that in the Old Testament?

*Dr. Craig:* Say it again?

*Student:* I think it was – which king was it? – of Israel that God said, *I need a lying spirit to convince him to come to battle*. And he said . . . so there are evil spirits and they do . . . God is sovereign. He makes everything work together for our good to those that love the Lord. Not to be afraid of, but there are spirit bodies we're fighting.

*Dr. Craig:* And that isn't denied by these Christian apologists. Remember what their concern was was how do you distinguish between a demonic miracle (one of these spirits) and a divine miracle? And they said the tip-off will be the religio-historical context in which it occurs. For example, these lying miracles of Pharaoh's court occurred in the context of pagan Egyptian polytheism and therefore were not plausibly attributed to God, whereas the acts produced by Moses occurred in the context of Israelite monotheism and therefore were plausibly attributed to God. So they're not at all denying that there can be miracles that would be produced by spirit beings or demons, but they would say the way you could tell the difference (or that you should try to tell the difference – there may be ambiguous cases) you would look at the religio-historical context in which it occurs and that would help you to discern whether the miracle is divine or demonic. I think all of us have probably heard stories of people who get involved in the occult, in seances, in Ouija boards, in magic, who then begin to have these sort of occult experiences that are plausibly not from God because the religio-historical context in which these events take place makes it plausible that these would be demonic rather than divine.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Spinoza's concern with lesser spiritual beings like angels and demons would probably not trouble very many contemporary secular thinkers. Such beings are part of the furniture, so to speak, of a wider theistic view, so no atheist today would seriously concede the historicity of the Gospel miracles and yet maintain that they were wrought by angels. It would not be, I think, unwarranted to have inferred that if such events are genuine miracles then these are miracles that have been wrought by God.

Spinoza's final sub-point, that a supposed miracle may really be the effect of an unknown law of nature, isn't really an objection against the occurrence of miracles, but rather it's an objection against the identification of miracles. Granted that miracles are possible, how can we know when one has occurred? This problem has been persuasively formulated in our own day by the philosopher Antony Flew. Flew writes:

We simply do not have, and could not have, any natural . . . criterion which enables us to say, when faced with something which is found to have actually happened, that here we have an achievement which nature, left to her own unaided devices, could never encompass. The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden!<sup>51</sup>

This is the very problem that someone here raised a couple of weeks ago with regard to spontaneous remissions of diseases. How do we know when a genuine miracle has occurred as opposed to a purely natural event that is the product of unknown laws of nature – unknown causes? Well, here I want to refer to Stephen Bilynskyj's criteria for identifying some event E as a miracle. This is from Bilynskyj's doctoral dissertation at the University of Notre Dame on "God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle."<sup>52</sup> Bilynskyj lists the following four criteria for the discernment of miracles:

- (1) The evidence for the occurrence of E is at least as good as it is for other acceptable but unusual events similarly distant in time and space from the point of the inquiry;
- (2) An account of the natures and/or powers of the causally relevant natural agents, such that they could account for E, would be clumsy and *ad hoc*; [*ad hoc* means contrived or just made up for that purpose.]
- (3) There is no evidence except the inexplicability of E for one or more natural agents which could produce E;
- (4) There is some justification for a supernatural explanation of E, independent of the inexplicability of E.

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51                      *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Miracles," by Antony Flew.  
52                      Bilynskyj, "God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle," p. 222.



Now, with regard to point (4), classical Christian apologists were quite correct in pointing to the religio-historical context as providing that justification for discerning a genuine miracle as opposed to a merely anomalous event: when the miracles occur at a momentous time (for example, a man's leprosy vanishing when Jesus speaks the words "Be clean") and do not recur regularly in history, as they would if they were the product of natural causes, and when the miracles are numerous and various, as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth (healings, exorcisms, feeding of the five thousand, walking on the water, preternatural knowledge, and so forth), then their chance of being the result of unknown natural causes is minimal.

Furthermore, even if we leave Jesus' miracles aside and focus our attention on his resurrection from the dead, I think that the supernatural nature of that event alone may be successfully defended. We're not asking here whether the facts of the case, such as the empty tomb or the post-mortem appearances, might be explained in a natural manner. Rather, the question is, if Jesus actually did rise from the dead, would we then be justified in inferring a supernatural cause for that event? Here I think the overwhelming majority of people would say yes. Those who argue against the resurrection try to explain the facts of the case without allowing that Jesus rose from the dead, but I know of no critic who argues that the best explanation of the facts is that Jesus rose from the dead but his resurrection was a purely natural occurrence. That would appear to be a somewhat desperate obstinacy.

Two factors, I think, undergird this reasoning. First, the resurrection so exceeds what we know of natural causes that it seems most reasonable to attribute it to a supernatural cause. Hume himself admitted that it is never in the history of the world been heard of that a truly dead man has been raised from the dead. Given the length of time that Jesus had been dead (a night, a day, and a night) it would be idle to compare his resurrection with the resuscitation of persons pronounced to be clinically dead in hospitals. But more than that: it's important to keep in mind that the resurrection was more than just the resuscitation of a corpse. It was not a return to the earthly life, but rather it was the transformation of the body to a new mode of existence, which Paul described as powerful, glorious, imperishable, and Spirit-directed (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). It is inconceivable that such an event could be the result of natural causes. Moreover, if it were the result of natural causes, then its singularity in the history of mankind would be very difficult to understand – why hasn't it happened again? Why does this not happen regularly? In the nearly two thousand years that have elapsed since that event, no natural causes have been discovered that could explain it. On the contrary, the advance of science has only served to confirm that such an event is naturally impossible.

The second point is that the supernatural explanation is given immediately, once again, in the religio-historical context in which the event occurred. Jesus' resurrection was not



merely an anomalous event occurring without a context; it came as the climax to Jesus' own life and ministry. As the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (who was my doctoral mentor in Munich) explains,

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone or anyone has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews because he had blasphemed against God.

Jesus' claim to authority, through which he put himself in God's place, was . . . blasphemous for Jewish ears. Because of this Jesus was then also slandered before the Roman Governor as a rebel. If Jesus really has been raised, this claim has been visibly and unambiguously confirmed by the God of Israel, who was allegedly blasphemed by Jesus.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, the religio-historical context as well as the inexplicability of the event itself furnishes us with the key to discerning the supernatural character of that event.<sup>54</sup>

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53 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. L.L. Wilkins and D.A. Priebe (London: SCM, 1968), p. 67.

54 Total Running Time: 39:28 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)

## Lecture 17: Hume's Abject Failure

Today we want to look at David Hume's "in principle" argument against miracles. Despite its influence, Hume's argument is generally recognized by philosophers today, in the words of the philosopher of science John Earman, as an "abject failure."<sup>55</sup> Earman is a Professor of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh and not a Christian (not even a theist), and yet he recognizes that Hume's argument against miracles is, as he puts it, an abject failure. What Earman means by that is that it's not just a minor mistake – this argument is demonstrably, irremediably a failure. Even Hume's admirers today try at most to salvage some insightful nugget from Hume's convoluted discussion, typically Hume's maxim that "no testimony . . . is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless this testimony is of such a kind that . . . its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavors to establish." But, as we'll see, even that maxim requires re-interpretation.

Hume's "in principle" argument actually involves two more or less independent claims. First, on the one hand, there is his claim that miracles are by definition utterly improbable. Secondly, on the other hand, there is his claim that no amount of evidence could ever serve to overcome that intrinsic improbability. So, on the one hand, miracles are intrinsically, utterly improbable; and secondly, no amount of evidence could possibly overcome that improbability and establish the probability of a miracle. Well, as it turns out, both of these claims are mistaken.

Let's look first at the second claim that no amount of evidence could ever serve to establish a miracle. Stimulated by Hume's argument against miracles, there arose a discussion among probability theorists from Condorcet in the 18th century to John Stuart Mill in the 19th century over how much evidence it would take to establish the occurrence of a highly improbable event.<sup>56</sup> It was soon realized by probability theorists that if you simply weigh the probability of the event over against the reliability of the witnesses to the event then we would be led into denying the occurrence of events which, though highly improbable, we reasonably know to have actually occurred. To give an example, suppose on the morning news you hear a broadcast that the pick in last night's lottery was 7-4-9-2-8-7-1. This is a report of an event that is extraordinarily improbable, one out of several million, that that number would be picked, and even if the morning news' accuracy is known to be 99.99% reliable, nevertheless the improbability of the event will swamp the probability of the witness's reliability, so that we should never believe such a report. Even the lottery winner should never believe that, in fact, the report

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55 John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

56 See S. L. Zabell, "The Probabilistic Analysis of Testimony," *Journal of Statistical Planning and Inference* 20 (1988): 327-354.

is accurate. In order to believe the report, Hume would require us to have enough evidence in favor of the morning news' reliability to counterbalance the intrinsic improbability of the event itself, which is just absurd.

What probability theorists came to see is that what also needs to be considered is not just the intrinsic improbability of the event or the reliability of the witness, but you also need to consider the probability that if the reported event had *not* occurred, then the witness's testimony would be just as it is. You need to weigh the probability that if the event had not occurred then the witness's testimony would be just as it is. As John Stuart Mill wrote,

To know whether a coincidence does or does not require more evidence to render it credible than an ordinary event, we must refer, in every instance, to first principles, and estimate afresh what is the probability that the given testimony would have been delivered in that instance, supposing the fact which it asserts not to be true.<sup>57</sup>

So you've got to weigh the probability that the evidence would be just as it is if in fact the event had not taken place.

To return to our example of the morning news, the probability that the morning news would announce the pick as 7-4-9-2-8-7-1 if some other number had in fact been chosen is incredibly small given that the newscasters had no preference for that announced number. On the other hand, the announcement is much more probable if 7-4-9-2-8-7-1 were the actual number chosen. This comparative likelihood easily counterbalances the high improbability of the event reported. So, even though the event itself is highly improbable, nevertheless the improbability that the evidence would be just as it is if the event had not occurred can counterbalance that high intrinsic improbability.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* Can you go back and repeat Hume's maxim a little bit slower please?

*Dr. Craig:* Sure. Hume's so-called maxim is that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless this testimony is such that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact that it endeavors to establish. This maxim is the one nugget out of Hume that philosophers who are admirers of David Hume try to preserve in his argument against miracles. They will acknowledge the argument fails but they'll say, *Well, at least Hume's maxim is correct.* But what I'll try to show is that even this maxim doesn't wear its interpretation on its sleeve and that properly understood it really amounts to a triviality. One more time: no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless this testimony is

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<sup>57</sup> J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 2 vols. (London: 1843), Bk. 3, ch. 25, § 6, cited in Zabell, "Probabilistic Analysis of Testimony," p. 331.

such that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact that it endeavors to establish.

*Student:* Do you take probabilities to be objective or subjective, because I know there are some philosophers who take probability to be nothing more than . . .

*Dr. Craig:* I don't think that matters for this discussion at this point. He's asking a technical question about probabilities. Later I'll be referring to what's called epistemic probability which would be the degree to which a rational agent would expect the hypothesis to be true on the evidence. But the failure of Hume's argument will not hinge on that, I think we'll see. The failure of Hume's argument will hinge on the fact that he neglects completely this crucial probability that we just talked about – that if the event had not occurred that the evidence would be just as it is.

## END DISCUSSION

Let's proceed to look at this more closely.

The realization on the part of probability theorists that other factors need to be included in the correct calculation of the probability of some event comes to expression in a formula of probability theory known as Bayes' Theorem. Let's let R represent some miraculous event, say the resurrection of Jesus. Let's let E represent the specific evidence for that event. In the case of the resurrection, in my analysis this would be the facts of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances of Jesus, and the very origin of the Christian faith itself. Those would be comprised in the specific evidence for R. Finally, let B represent our general background information of the world apart from the specific evidence E. So you take our basic knowledge of the world and abstract from that E (take E out of it) and that will leave you with B – the background knowledge of the world.

Bayes' Theorem allows us to calculate the probability of R in a so-called "odds form" which is one of the simplest forms of Bayes' Theorem. But before I put this on the board, I recognize that many of us suffer from what my friend Lydia McGrew calls lurking math-o-phobia; that is to say, when we see an equation our eyes sort of glaze over and it's difficult even to take it in. But in this case I'm going to go through it slowly and I think make it quite comprehensible. So stick with me and we will examine it together.

$$\frac{\text{Pr}(R|E\&B)}{\text{Pr}(\text{not-}R|E\&B)} = \frac{\text{Pr}(R|B)}{\text{Pr}(\text{not-}R|B)} \times \frac{\text{Pr}(E|R\&B)}{\text{Pr}(E|\text{not-}R\&B)}$$

We want to consider what is the probability (which we represent by Pr) of the resurrection of Jesus on the evidence and the background information. So Pr is probability, R is the resurrection hypothesis, and the straight line [ | ] indicates that we're

going to consider the probability of R given E and B, or on the assumption of E and B, or relative to E and B. So what is the probability of R given the specific evidence and the background information? We're going to compare that to the probability of not-R. The probability of not-R on E and B – that is to say, what is the probability that the resurrection did not occur given the evidence and the background information? This ratio expresses to us the probability of the resurrection on the total evidence E and B – the background information and the specific evidence.

This ratio will enable us to determine the odds of the resurrection being true on E and B. If the number in the numerator is smaller than the number in the denominator, then it will turn out that the resurrection is improbable. It's less probable. What Hume wants to argue is that the numerator in this case is always inevitably going to be less than the denominator, and therefore it can never be rational to believe in the resurrection. If the ratio were 1-to-1 (say it was 3 over 3), then that would mean that they have an equal chance of occurring and so the odds of the resurrection occurring would be 50/50 or 50%. If you have a 1-to-1 ratio, you've got odds of 50/50 for the resurrection occurring. But if the numerator is smaller than the denominator then the odds of the resurrection occurring are less than 50%. What Hume wants to show is that in principle the numerator is always smaller than the denominator, and therefore given the odds no rational person should ever believe (no matter what the evidence is) that the resurrection has taken place.

Whether or not the resurrection is more probable than not is going to depend upon two other ratios on the right-hand side of the equation. In the first ratio, we consider the probability of the resurrection on the background information alone [ $\Pr(R|B)$ ]. Leaving aside the specific evidence, what is the probability of the resurrection just given the background information? And then we consider the probability that the resurrection did not take place on the background information [ $\Pr(\text{not-}R|B)$ ]. So, what is the probability of the resurrection or not given the background information and leaving aside the specific evidence for the resurrection? This ratio gives us the intrinsic probability of the resurrection. It is the prior probability of the resurrection before you look at the specific evidence. Before you look at any evidence, this is the probability of the resurrection – just the intrinsic probability of the resurrection. So we're simply asking: given our background information of the world without any specific evidence, which is more probable? R or not-R? In the second ratio, which is multiplied by the first, we consider what is the probability of the evidence given the resurrection and the background information [ $\Pr(E|R \& B)$ ], and we contrast that with the probability of the evidence given that the resurrection did not occur [ $\Pr(E|\text{not-}R \& B)$ ]. So, what is the probability that the evidence would be as it is if the resurrection did take place, and what is the probability that the evidence would be as it is if, in fact, the resurrection had not taken place? This is called the explanatory power of the hypothesis. How well does the event or hypothesis

explain the evidence? Is the evidence more probable on the hypothesis than on the contrary or the negation of the hypothesis? That's the explanatory power. What we have in the right hand side of the equation is the intrinsic probability of the resurrection multiplied by the explanatory power of the resurrection.

Notice that even if the intrinsic probability of the resurrection is very low – suppose relative to the background information, not-R is vastly more probable than R – that doesn't mean that the resurrection is improbable on the total evidence because that improbability could be counterbalanced by the higher explanatory power of the resurrection hypothesis. Even if this ratio  $[\Pr(R|B) / \Pr(\text{not-}R|B)]$  is very low, this one  $[\Pr(E|R\&B) / \Pr(E|\text{not-}R\&B)]$  could be very high and counterbalancing. For example, suppose that the intrinsic probability of the resurrection is 1-to-90. Nevertheless, suppose that the explanatory power of the resurrection is 90-to-1. In that case, you multiply these together and you get 1-over-1 which means the resurrection has a 50% chance of being true. So you can see that even if the intrinsic probability of the resurrection is extremely low, so long as the second ratio is extremely high it can counterbalance any improbability intrinsically in the resurrection itself. That was the factor that Mill and others identified as being critical. What is going to be the probability if the event had not occurred that the evidence would be just as it is.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* I think I remember this coming up when you had a debate with Bart Ehrman. My question may have been his question – how do you assign objective quantities to each of these things?

*Dr. Craig:* This is a very good question that you are raising. I think, and I'll say this later, that it's really impossible to assign numerical values to these letters. But very few historians do that. Historians don't use Bayes' Theorem. You'll remember when we discussed the evidence for the resurrection, instead we used a model called inference to the best explanation. What we did was we assessed the rival hypotheses in terms of certain criteria like explanatory power, explanatory scope, degree of *ad hocness*, plausibility, and so forth. I think that's the better way to try to run an argument for the resurrection. But where Bayes' Theorem is helpful is in exposing the error of David Hume and his contemporary descendants like Bart Ehrman who still say that because a miracle is intrinsically so improbable therefore no amount of evidence could ever establish it. What we'll see is that that is demonstrably fallacious regardless of your ability to assign numerical values to these. I think what we'll do is talk in generalities here – *Is this probability terribly low?* – and as long as it's not terribly low I think that the argument for miracles can go through.

*Student:* It makes sense now placed in this context, knowing the history and knowing that Mill and others responded to Hume the way that they did.

*Dr. Craig:* I think it's very helpful to see the background of this discussion and how these probability theorists came to this conclusion. In one sense, although I'm going to indict Hume here in a minute, you've got to cut him a little slack because he wrote before the probability calculus had ever been articulated. So it's not surprising that he would have been ignorant of some of these factors. But that provides no excuse whatsoever for Hume's modern progeny such as Bart Ehrman and other New Testament scholars who continue to reiterate this long-refuted argument.

*Student:* The evidence of miracle is one thing, but the reception or the human consciousness of that miracle is another. The human consciousness of God's work creates history. It doesn't necessarily matter to what's intrinsic . . . human consciousness is independent of what happened because different people interpret differently.

*Dr. Craig:* That's true. But if Hume and his progeny could show the people who believe in miracles are irrational, that's a serious objection. So it's not just enough to say people have their subjective responses to miracles. I think it's important to show that their argument is actually fallacious.

*Student:* The disciples knew Jesus, so they have a different dimension of understanding than the onlookers.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, but again, remember Hume's argument. No amount of evidence could serve to establish a miracle. Thomas, confronted in the upper room with the risen Jesus standing before him, should conclude that it's a hallucination or some kind of strange experience rather than believe it. According to Hume, no amount of evidence can establish a miracle. What we want to show is why he's mistaken in thinking that, and it's very easy to do so. I'm going to do it in just a minute.

*Student:* I'm going to try to bring this down to my level. It seems to me really what Hume is saying is that the background knowledge, i.e. nature or the environment, is so strong and we don't see miracles every day – we hear of them, but we don't . . . I've never personally, you might say, experienced one – so in his mind you can explain away the evidence, i.e. it was a hallucination, because he feels that the probability of the background is so infinitely strong that we are just misled by a few people claiming a few things that he feels he can rationally explain away.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. What you're identifying there is his first claim that miracles by definition are utterly improbable. You're quite right – that is his assumption. We'll look at that probably next week, but right now we want to consider the claim that no amount of evidence could serve to establish a miracle. Remember, in his argument, when we



discussed it, he's willing to grant for the sake of argument that the evidence for a miracle constitutes a full proof. Remember that? He differentiates between a proof and a probability. He says let's give the defender of miracle the claim that the evidence for a miracle is a full proof. He still argues that it's not enough to establish a miracle.

*Student:* In terms of probability, is there a difference between a 2-to-3 ratio or a 4-to-3 over 7-to-3? Does that matter for sake of argument of it being more probable or not?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, that's right. It makes a difference. For example, if something is 2-to-1 then that's not going to be as probable as something that's 7-to-1. So you're quite right, yes. But what I'm trying to do, in answer to an earlier point, is avoid trying to assign numerical values to these because I think that's beyond our ability to do. What we just want to ask in very general terms: is the intrinsic probability of the resurrection outrageously low? As someone just said, is it just hopelessly low? And what is the probability of the evidence given the resurrection hypothesis or not? Is that high? Is it low? What is it? We don't need to give actual numerical values.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Hume, in his argument, never discusses the second ratio. He focuses entirely on the intrinsic probability of a miracle and argues that because this value is so low that therefore the probability of the resurrection on the evidence and the background information is comparably low. He clearly overlooked the explanatory power of the resurrection hypothesis so that his argument is demonstrably a failure. As I said, even if this ratio is incredibly low, so long as this ratio is comparably high it can counterbalance it. So it's just demonstrably mathematically false that the intrinsic probability of a miracle can never be overcome so that the probability of R on E and B is much higher than the probability of not-R on E and B. So much for Hume's vaunted in principle argument.

There is a slogan beloved in the free thought culture: "extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence." I don't know how many times I've heard this said as an excuse for not believing in the miracles and the resurrection of Jesus. Extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence. But what we can now see is that this seemingly commonsensical slogan is, in fact, false as usually understood. In order to establish the occurrence of a highly improbable event, you don't need to have lots of evidence. What the skeptic seems to be saying by his slogan is that in order for us to believe in a miraculous event you've got to have a tremendous amount of evidence. But why think that that's the case? *Because a miracle is so improbable*, the skeptic will say. But Bayes' Theorem shows that rationally believing in a highly improbable event doesn't require an enormous amount of evidence. All that is crucial is that the evidence is far more probable given the occurrence of the event than it would be if the event had not taken place. The

bottom line is that it doesn't always take a huge amount of evidence to establish the occurrence of a miracle.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I would submit to you that Thomas was one of the Lord's disciples. Thomas's response was a very human response, and without the Holy Spirit even he would probably not have believed it even though Christ stood in front of him. It's just the way we are.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, but these are matters that you and an earlier student are raising of human psychology and the need of the Holy Spirit to soften the hardened heart. No one wants to deny that. What we're trying to show here is that this argument that because miracles are intrinsically improbable relative to our background information that no amount of evidence could serve to establish one, and that's just demonstrably false. It neglects the key factor in the probability calculus and just looks at the intrinsic probability of a miracle, and that is mathematically and demonstrably fallacious.

*Student:* You can turn this around to the materialist because they believe extraordinarily improbable things if you take the laws of nature. You know that one fertilized cell could be trillions and organize itself into systems and whatever. You could have physical laws. You could have physical constants and ionization constants.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. What you're making is the same point that I mentioned earlier that if you do what Hume did and just focus on the intrinsic improbability of the event and neglect this other factor then you're going to be led to deny the occurrence of all kinds of things; for example, your own existence because relative to the general background knowledge of human biology and reproduction, your existence is enormously improbable that one egg and one sperm should have united to produce you. So nobody should believe that you exist relative to the background information. You're quite right. This objection was actually pressed against Hume. Hume, himself, in his essay, says that the King of Siam, who lived in a tropical environment, should not believe the reports of travelers that water could exist in the form of a solid. Suppose travelers returned from the northern hemisphere and tell the King of Siam that water can exist as a solid substance called ice or snow. The King of Siam should not believe them no matter what they said, no matter how many reports they gave, and that they were willing to die for the truth of their reports. Hume said the King of Siam shouldn't believe it because, given his background information of the world, that is impossible. He has absolutely no experience of such a thing. You are quite right that if you follow Hume's argument against miracles you will be led to deny not just the existence of miracles but all sorts of natural events that are highly improbable.

*Student:* Is there a way to apply this practically? I understand how we're applying it to Christ's resurrection and the miracles in the Bible, but suppose someone comes up today and says, *I'm a miracle worker, I can do this or that, my prophecies are true*, or something like that. Because frankly I'm going to be a skeptic. If somebody says, *I can do this or that*, or, *I saw ghosts*, whatever, I'm going to be like, *Are you really sure about that?* Practically speaking, can you apply this same type of . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, exactly. Think of someone's example the other week about the spontaneous remission of someone's cancer. You would say what is the probability that his cancer would be remitted given that this faith-healer prayed for him versus the probability that it spontaneously remitted? You could argue that it's not all that much more probable in this case that it's due to the faith-healer than to the spontaneous remission. There might be other reasons that would contribute to that for thinking that, in fact, there is a natural explanation for the supposed miracle. This is going to apply on a case-by-case basis, and the same factors will need to be considered: what is the intrinsic probability of the event occurring given our background information apart from the evidence, then what about the specific evidence that we have that it took place, and how much more probable is that evidence on the hypothesis than on the negation of the hypothesis. So it would apply to modern miracles as well, though for me as a Christian I'm most interested in how it would apply to Jesus' miracles and resurrection.

*Student:* I always thought it's interesting how this sort of Humean argument . . . and I think even John Earman makes this point, too . . . about how if you take consistently what seems almost stifle scientific knowledge – you think about things like quarks or even black holes (I was thinking quantum mechanics) – all the weird sort of stuff we've discovered in modern physics. It would seem if you take Hume's argument you could just say given the background knowledge of how the world works there's no way you could believe anything weird like that. That's clearly wrong.

*Dr. Craig:* Because, given the truth of the hypothesis, it has much greater explanatory power than if the hypothesis were false and so that can balance out this intrinsic improbability, as you say, that these weird things occur. Improbable events happen all the time, don't they? We shouldn't say that therefore no amount of evidence can establish that they occurred. Whether or not it does is going to depend on this other ratio that Hume neglected.

*Student:* It also shows as even with the Indian prince and the water example the somewhat flexibility or the . . . what's the word I'm looking for? . . . the problematic way that Hume assigns probabilities as just background knowledge. Most of us nowadays, we would take water being a solid – going from liquid to solid – it's just part of the background knowledge.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, that's right. You would say this is part of our background knowledge today and the King of Siam was extremely limited in what he took to be background knowledge. So, yes, that's a valid point as well.<sup>58</sup>

## Lecture 18: Determining the Intrinsic Probability of the Resurrection

We've been looking at Hume's in principle argument against the identification of a miracle. We saw that it involves two claims: first of all, that by definition any miracle is utterly improbable, and secondly that no amount of evidence could possibly demonstrate a miracle. Last week we examined the second of those claims and saw that it was demonstrably fallacious because Hume, at that time ignorant of the probability calculus, considered only the probability of the resurrection on the background information alone – the intrinsic probability of the resurrection – and he neglected the other crucial factor which is the explanatory power of the resurrection hypothesis – how well does the resurrection explain the evidence as opposed to the denial of the resurrection.

Today we want to turn to Hume's first claim that the evidence for a miracle is by definition utterly improbable. In order to show that no evidence could possibly establish the historicity of a miracle, Hume needs to show that the intrinsic probability of a miracle like the resurrection is unacceptably low. That takes us to the first claim of Hume's argument, that miracles are by definition utterly improbable. Why did Hume think this? Hume claimed that the uniform experience of mankind supports the laws of nature rather than miracles which violate those laws. At face value such an assertion seems to be clearly question-begging. To say that uniform experience is against miracles is implicitly to assume already that the alleged miracle has not occurred; that all miracle reports are false. Otherwise truly uniform experience would not be against miracles. So the whole argument is reasoning in a circle if we take uniform experience to rule out by definition the occurrence of miracles. John Earman, whose book *Hume's Abject Failure* I shared with you last week, interprets Hume to mean, not that uniform experience is against miracles, but rather that up to the case under investigation, uniform experience has been against miracles. That is to say, when we come to some alleged miracle claim we do so knowing that all miracle claims apart from that one have in the past been spurious. Earman takes Hume to construe the intrinsic probability of a miracle on the background information to be a matter of *frequency*. Miracles are events that are utterly infrequent up to the time of the miracle in question. But Earman points out that the frequency model of probability simply will not work in this context. For trying to construe the probabilities in Bayes' Theorem as frequencies would lead us to disqualify many of the theoretical hypotheses in the advanced physical sciences. For example, Earman points out that scientists are investing thousands of man-hours and millions of dollars trying to observe an event of proton decay, that is to say, the decay of a proton into more fundamental subatomic particles, even though such an event has never been observed. On Hume's frequency model of probability such research is an enormous waste of time and energy because the event will have a probability of zero. Based on frequency, it has no

probability of occurring, and therefore why are we spending millions of dollars and thousands of man-hours looking for something like this? Earman concludes that in the case of the intrinsic probability of a miracle (the probability of the miracle on the background information) the guidance for assigning the probability “cannot take the simple minded form” of using the frequency of R-type events in past experience; that frequency may be flatly zero (as in an event of proton decay), but that doesn't mean that we should therefore set the probability of R on B [ $\Pr(R|B)$ ] to be equal to zero.<sup>59</sup> So frequencies won't work in the context of Bayes' Theorem.

How we assess the intrinsic probability of Jesus' resurrection on the background information is going to depend, I think, critically on how Jesus' resurrection is characterized. The hypothesis “Jesus rose from the dead” is ambiguous. It actually comprises two radically different hypotheses. One is the hypothesis “Jesus rose naturally from the dead” (that this is a purely natural event); the other hypothesis would be that “Jesus rose supernaturally from the dead” (or in other words, “God raised Jesus from the dead”). The naturalistic hypothesis “Jesus rose naturally from the dead” is admitted on all hands to be outrageously improbable. Given what we know of cell necrosis, when someone dies, it is fantastically, even unimaginably, improbable that all of the cells in Jesus' body would spontaneously come back to life again. Conspiracy theories, apparent death theories, hallucination theories, twin brother theories – virtually any hypothesis, however unlikely, would be more probable than the hypothesis that all of the cells in Jesus' corpse spontaneously came back to life again. Therefore, that improbability will significantly lower the probability of the hypothesis “Jesus rose from the dead” because that probability will be a function of its two component hypotheses, the one natural and the other supernatural. The improbability of the natural hypothesis will therefore drag down the probability of the hypothesis “Jesus rose from the dead” which is not what we're interested in really. We're interested in the supernatural hypothesis – that “God raised Jesus from the dead.” The evidence for the laws of nature which renders the hypothesis improbable that Jesus rose naturally from the dead is simply irrelevant to the probability God raised Jesus from the dead. Since our interest is in this supernatural hypothesis, we can assess this hypothesis on its own without having to include the hypothesis that Jesus rose naturally from the dead.

So let's let R represent the hypothesis “God raised Jesus from the dead.” What is the intrinsic probability of that hypothesis on the background information [ $\Pr(R|B)$ ]?

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* But of course this position requires that you believe there is a God.

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59 John Earman, “Bayes, Hume, and Miracles,” *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 303.

*Dr. Craig:* The hypothesis will depend upon the probability that there is a God. That's right. I'll say something more about that momentarily. But you're right – that hypothesis will depend on the probability that God exists.

*Student:* I think that if Hume is convinced God does not exist then obviously he's going to say only natural explanations can be used.

*Dr. Craig:* Fair enough. That's right. Hume did his duty and attacked arguments for the existence of God and tried to show that they are at best inconclusive. That's fair. That's right. But I think that what you're simply underlining here is the importance of doing our natural theology and making sure we have in our quiver some good arguments for God's existence.

*Student:* I'm wondering if Hume's argument can be said to be still question-begging in another respect even if you adopt this sort of frequency interpretation of Hume. I think you pointed out the other week that our movements of the will, those would be miraculous in the sense that we're immaterial agents and are interacting with the world and that's not something that the nature itself can produce.

*Dr. Craig:* I'm not sure the charge here to be made against Hume would be begging the question, but it would be that his view would imply determinism, wouldn't it? It would imply that we don't really have freedom of the will, and so he would have to acknowledge that as being an implication of the argument – that uniform experience is against miracles. He would have to say uniform experience is against free acts of the will as well.

*Student:* So that would still be question-begging in that respect, right? You're just assuming toward determinism from the outset and given libertarian freedom . . .

*Dr. Craig:* It's kind of like an earlier question – I think it would just show that that's an implication of his view, but I think that he would probably willingly embrace that view and say that uniform experience is against this. Then you can challenge him just as someone might challenge him on saying: *Wait a minute! Uniform experience is not against miracles.* Look at Craig Keener's two-volume book on contemporary miracles in the world today. Keener's book is chock-full of stories about contemporary miracles for which there is in some cases very good evidence. So one might simply say that Hume is wrong here. It's not that he's begging the question, but that he's incorrect in thinking that up to the case under consideration uniform experience has been against miracles.

## **END DISCUSSION**

We want to consider the resurrection hypothesis to be not that Jesus rose from the dead but that God raised Jesus from the dead. The reason is because the hypothesis “Jesus rose from the dead” is ambiguous – it has two sub-components, one of which is unimaginably



improbable and that would drag down the probability of the overall hypothesis. So why not just leave that aside as irrelevant? Let's consider the supernatural hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead and ask: is that improbable relative to the background information?

When we ask that question, if we let G represent God's existence, and B as before be the background information, and R the hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead," then the Theorem on Total Probability enables us to say that the probability of the resurrection on the background information alone is equal to the sum of two products:

$$\Pr(R|B) = \Pr(R|G\&B) \times \Pr(G|B) + \Pr(R|\text{not-}G\&B) \times \Pr(\text{not-}G|B)$$

First, the probability of the resurrection given God and the background information times the probability of God's existence on the background information plus the probability of the resurrection given no God and the background information times the probability of no God on the background information. So, in order to calculate the probability of the resurrection on the background information, we ask what is the probability of the resurrection given that God exists and our background information and what is the intrinsic probability of God's existence on the background information, which is what someone earlier was asking about (how probable is it that God exists?) And then you compute what is the probability of the resurrection given atheism and the background information and what is the probability that atheism is true given the background information?

How we assess the probability of God on the background information is going to depend on whether or not our background information B includes the facts that support the arguments of natural theology for God's existence such as the origin of the universe, the fine-tuning of the universe for intelligent life, the objectivity of moral values and duties in the world, and so on and so forth. If B does not include those facts, then the probability of God's existence on the background information will be a lot lower than if it does include those facts. In that case, the evidence E for the resurrection will also have to carry the full weight of proving God's existence and not just justifying belief in the resurrection.

As we've seen, the classical defenders of miracles did not treat miracles as evidence for God's existence; rather for them God's existence was taken to be implied by facts already included in B. So I suggest that we include in B all of the facts that support the premises in the arguments of natural theology like the origin of the universe, the fine-tuning of the universe, the objectivity of moral values and duties, and so forth. On this basis let's ask how probable is God's existence on this background information  $[\Pr(G|B)]$ ? Well, let's be generous and say here that the probability of God's existence on the background information is only 0.5. You know that I think it's a lot higher than that on the basis of my

defense of these arguments, but let's say on the basis of the background information alone it's a 50/50 chance that God exists. So we'll assign a probability of 50% to God's existence on the background information. The other probability that needs to be assessed is the probability of the resurrection given God's existence and the background information  $[Pr(R|G\&B)]$ . Notice something here. What is the probability that God raised Jesus from the dead if God does not exist  $[Pr(R|not-G\&B)]$ ? It's 0, isn't it! If God does not exist then the probability that God raised Jesus from the dead is 0, and since 0 times any number is 0, that cancels out the second half of the equation. That sum will just be adding 0. So the probability of the resurrection on the background information reduces to just these two figures – the intrinsic probability of God's existence on the background information  $[Pr(G|B)]$  and the probability that if God exists that he would raise Jesus from the dead  $[Pr(R|G\&B)]$ . We can think of this probability as the degree of expectation that a perfectly rational agent would have, given that God exists and the background information, that God would raise Jesus from the dead. What is the expectation that God would raise Jesus from the dead if God exists and the background information is as it is? Well, God has never before intervened to do such a thing in history as far as we know, and there are certainly other ways that he could vindicate Jesus, if he wanted to, even if he did want to. So how would a perfectly rational agent assess the risk of betting in this case that, given G and B, God would raise Jesus from the dead? What are you willing to gamble on that probability? This question has been called the problem of divine psychology – how do we know what God would do? Once again, I think that the religio-historical context is crucial in assessing this probability. In estimating the probability that given God's existence and the background information that God would raise Jesus from the dead, we mustn't abstract from the historical context of Jesus' own life, ministry, and teaching, insofar as these are included in our background knowledge. If we include in B our knowledge of the life of the historical Jesus up until the time of his crucifixion and burial, then I don't think that we can say that God's raising Jesus from the dead is so improbable. Let's just say, for the sake of illustration, that the odds are 50/50 that God would raise Jesus from the dead. In that case, 50% times 50% is 25%, or the intrinsic probability of the resurrection on the background information is 1 out of 4. That certainly is easily overcome by the other factors in Bayes' Theorem – the greater explanatory probability of the resurrection hypothesis. Therefore, I think this intrinsic improbability of the resurrection is easily overcome by the other factors that we talked about in Bayes' Theorem.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* In assessing the resurrection on the background information, I'm just wondering does G in this case represent the Christian God that we're talking about?

*Dr. Craig:* That would be question-begging.

*Student:* That's what I thought.

*Dr. Craig:* This is the God of natural theology.

*Student:* So when we consider the resurrection on G and B, we have to consider just a deistic form of God.

*Dr. Craig:* I hate to put it that way. I would say a generic form because the deistic form excludes miracles, right? So what we want to say is that we, on the basis of our arguments of natural theology which are included in B (or the facts that support them are included in B) that there exists a first, uncaused, beginningless, timeless, spaceless, immaterial, enormously powerful creator of the universe who is the locus of absolute goodness. Plus we include the life and teachings and ministry of the historical Jesus up until the time of his crucifixion and burial. Then the question will be: what's the probability that God would raise Jesus from the dead?

*Student:* Does this probability require that we assess other religions in the same stroke?

*Dr. Craig:* I think so. For example, if you had a really good reason to believe that Islam is true then you would say the probability that he would raise Jesus from the dead is negligible because Allah wouldn't do such a thing. But, as I'll say in a minute, I don't think we have any good reason to think that the God of natural theology is identical with Allah or a deistic god or anything of that sort.

*Student:* OK. So you just made the problem a bit easier by assuming a lower value to make the problem of defining this exact probability easier.

*Dr. Craig:* I guess I'm just assigning 50% to say it's an even shot. We don't know – it's 50/50. And if that's the case it turns out that the intrinsic probability of the resurrection is one out of four which is not at all difficult to overcome. It shows that the probability of R on B is not this astronomically inconceivably low probability that Hume thinks it is. What would be inconceivably improbable would be this naturalistic hypothesis that Jesus rose naturally from the dead. Yes, I agree that that's astronomically improbable. But I can't see any good reason to think that the hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead" is improbable relative to our background information.

*Student:* I understand when it comes to actually arguing for the resurrection of Jesus you don't use Bayes' Theorem. You use the inference to the best explanation because I think you've stated, *How can we really figure out the exact numbers of probability to plug into the equations?* That being said though, I'm curious – what's your take on Richard Swinburne's case? He uses Bayes' Theorem.

*Dr. Craig:* I find it hard to believe. He's talking about one of the great living Christian philosophers today, Richard Swinburne, who was Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University until his retirement several years ago. Swinburne actually assigns numerical

values to these factors in Bayes' Theorem, and I think he comes up with a probability of the resurrection of Jesus of about 97% as I recall. Well, when I see that I just sort of roll my eyes and think, come on! You can't assign those kinds of specific values. But what we can do, I think, is to say there's no good reason to think that this probability is terribly low, and that's what Hume would need to show. Remember the burden of proof is on him to show that the probability of R on B is astronomically low. I can't think of any good reason to think that it would be.

*Student:* Since so much of the equation depends upon the background information, is it fair to say then it's not just Christ's life and claims, it would be broader or greater than that.

*Dr. Craig:* I want it to include all of natural theology as well. The background information, B, is everything apart from E, the specific evidence for the resurrection which includes basically the discovery of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. We are going to exclude those from B but then everything else is in.

*Student:* Would you include Old Testament predictions of a Messiah?

*Dr. Craig:* Sure. Why not?

*Student:* Would you include the whole . . . I mean when you weave the Bible together, it seems to me he was the result of an expectation that God promised through Abraham and so forth. Am I being fair to want to include that in the background or is that too much?

*Dr. Craig:* Although I think many people would want to know what is the independent value of those evidences for Christ rather than sort of rolling them into this, but, as I say, B can include everything apart from the specific evidence that is adduced in support of the resurrection hypothesis.

*Student:* I had a question about Hume. It's been a long time since I've read him, but in *Against Miracles*, of course as you pointed out, he says that the uniform experience of nature counts against miracles. What does he say . . . I know he makes a famous argument against the design argument for the existence of God – creating the universe – but what does he say about the origin of the universe and would that be an event that he could not say can be explained by the uniform experience of nature?

*Dr. Craig:* Which is the argument you're asking about?

*Student:* Would Hume acknowledge that the uniform experience of nature cannot explain the origin of the universe and that therefore the origin of the universe would be an event that might require some supernatural explanation. I know he argues against the design theory . . .

*Dr. Craig:* You're talking about the cosmological argument. Now this is very interesting because, of course, writing in the 1700s Hume had no evidence of the origin of the universe. There was no evidence that the universe had a beginning because this was during this Newtonian age in which the universe was thought to have existed from eternity past. So the question of an origin didn't arise. But – and here is something that few scholars about Hume seem to know or appreciate – if you look at Hume's footnotes in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he admits that the idea of an infinite regress of events in time is a metaphysical absurdity and he says no man whose understanding is enlightened rather than corrupted by the natural sciences could ever assent to the idea of an infinite regress of events into the past, which implies the beginning of the universe. Now you conjoin that with Hume's belief in the causal principle – he didn't think you could prove the causal principle, but he wrote to John Stewart, *I never affirmed so absurd a proposition that an event might arise without a cause*. He said, *I just said that we don't know this by intuition or demonstration but through another source*. So Hume actually believed in and affirmed both premises of the *kalam* cosmological argument that the universe began to exist and that whatever begins to exist has a cause. So I think he is actually, implicitly, committed to the existence of a transcendent creator of the beginning of the universe.

*Student:* So I guess if Hume were forced to admit that the origin of the universe is a miraculous event, that counts against the uniform experience of nature, would that undermine his case against the miracle of the resurrection?

*Dr. Craig:* It certainly would. If we try to apply his argument against miracles to the origin of the universe, he would probably say the same thing – that no amount of evidence could possibly establish the origin of the universe or that there was this miraculous event that occurred. Then we're right back to what we've already talked about – that that is question-begging, or presupposes a model of probability that doesn't work and that it neglects all of the factors in the probability calculus. So he wouldn't have a good basis for denying this, and he admits the two premises. If anyone is interested in seeing those quotations from Hume, it's in the article that I wrote on J. L. Mackie's refutation of the *kalam* cosmological argument which is on the Reasonable Faith website.<sup>60</sup> Mackie was a British philosopher at Oxford University who was very much in the mold of David Hume, and so in rebutting Mackie I also looked at what Hume had to say and was quite surprised to see that Hume actually affirms both of these premises to be true.

## END DISCUSSION

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<sup>60</sup> See "Professor Mackie and the Kalam Cosmological Argument" at <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/the-existence-of-god/professor-mackie-and-the-kalam-cosmological-argument/> (accessed October 8, 2018).

As someone earlier indicated, I, in fact, think that it's impossible to assign numerical values to a probability like the resurrection on God and the background information  $[\Pr(R|G\&B)]$  with any sort of confidence. We don't have access to divine psychology. So I don't think we can really assign specific numerical values to these probabilities. I would say that these probabilities are, in the end, inscrutable; that is to say, you just put a question mark at that point in Bayes' Theorem. These probabilities are not discernible by us. The difficulty in assigning numerical values is that we're dealing here with a free agent, namely, the Creator of the universe. How do we know what he would do with respect to Jesus? But I think what we can say is that there is no reason to think that the probability of R on God and the background information is terribly low. I don't see any reason to think that that probability is terribly low, as Hume claims, so that the probability of the resurrection on the background information alone would become overwhelmingly improbable. We certainly cannot take the probability of the resurrection on God and the background information to be terribly low simply because of the infrequency of resurrections. Think about it – it may be precisely *because* the resurrection is unique that it is highly probable that God would choose it as a spectacular way of vindicating his Son's claims for which he was crucified. So it might actually be the very infrequency of resurrection-type events that makes it so highly probable that God would raise Jesus from the dead given God's existence and the background information.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I'm having a hard time understanding how these theorems can come about by these so-called philosophers. When we go back to the Bible, if we trust the Bible as being the Word of God, he not only tells us this is going to happen – the resurrection – Jesus tells us it's going to happen. So how do these philosophers come up with a theory that maybe it did, maybe it didn't, because we have actually documented words that it did happen. And there were a lot of people. Not just one, but there were a lot of people.

*Dr. Craig:* That's E. That's the specific evidence, E, that we have. Right? And we're not talking here about the probability of R on B and E. We're talking about just the probability of R on the background information. You take away any of the evidence for the resurrection specifically – you leave it out of account – and just ask: what's the probability of the resurrection on the background information alone? Where E comes into the picture is that second factor in Bayes' Theorem – how probable is the evidence given the resurrection of Jesus compared to how probable is that evidence given that Jesus did not rise from the dead? Which one explains the evidence better? That was the crucial factor neglected by Hume. He ignored that factor, and that invalidates his argument all on its own. But I want to claim as well that the resurrection of Jesus properly understood as this hypothesis “God raised Jesus from the dead” has not been shown to be

astronomically improbable. I don't see any good reason to think that that hypothesis is terribly improbable.

*Student:* Well, I would say the probability is 100% (the resurrection did occur) or 0 (the resurrection did not occur). The evidence that we have.

*Dr. Craig:* Not based on the evidence. You might say . . . I'm not sure how you would assess that, but what we're talking about here is what is the probability that God raised Jesus from the dead given the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection, plus our background information of the world. And I don't think anybody would say that that's 100%. Swinburne says 97%, which is pretty close, but nobody would say that based on historical evidence you arrive at absolute certainty. This is not mathematics. This is history, and that's not the way history works.

## **END DISCUSSION**

By way of summary, in conclusion, I think it's evident that there really is no “in principle” argument here against the identification of a miracle. Rather what will be at stake, as the example of Jesus' resurrection illustrates, is an “in fact” argument that handles an alleged miracle claim in its historical context, given the evidence for God's existence. So the skeptic has failed to show that any possible miracle claim has an intolerably low intrinsic probability. You couple that result with our earlier conclusion that even incredibly low intrinsic probabilities can be outweighed by other factors in Bayes' Theorem, and I think it's evident why contemporary philosophers<sup>61</sup> have come to see Hume's in principle argument as an abject failure.<sup>62</sup>

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61 I'm indebted to Tim and Lydia McGrew, epistemologists who specialize in confirmation theory, for very interesting and illuminating discussions of Hume's “in principle” argument.

62 Total Running Time: 41:16 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)



## Lecture 19: Angels and Demons

We've been looking at the problem of miracles, and I argued last time that there is no "in principle" objection to the identification of a miracle so that in the case of any alleged miracle it's going to be an "in fact" question as to whether it occurred. That is to say, what is the evidence for the miracle? That takes us to Hume's "in fact" argument that there is no good evidence for the occurrence of a miraculous event in history. Whether you think this is true on the contemporary scene or not is going to depend on how you assess the evidence for modern miracles. Here I would simply suggest you read Craig Keener's two-volume book on miracles in the world today in which Keener provides case after case after case of remarkable miracle stories that he claims meet Hume's standards for the identification of a miracle. I've argued, as you know in this class, that in any case the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is such that it is more probable to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead on the evidence and the background information than that he did not. Therefore, I think that Hume's "in fact" argument simply fails, and that will be a matter of a case-by-case analysis of the evidence for any particular miracle.

By way of summary, we've been talking now for several months about the doctrine of creation. We've examined God's creation of the universe *ex nihilo*, his conservation of the world in being, his concurrence with everything that happens in the world, and we've looked at his ordinary providence in governing the world, and then, most recently, at his extraordinary providence (that is to say, his miraculous actions in the world). Now we want to turn to an entirely new facet of the doctrine of creation which concerns the reality of angels and demons.

When we come to the subject of angels and demons we're dealing with an entirely different order of creation than the physical universe. On the Judeo-Christian view, there is another order of the created world that is not part of the physical universe but which nonetheless still depends upon God for its existence. These are the angelic beings that exist. These are encountered in both the Old Testament (where the word in the Hebrew for angels is *malakh*) and in the New Testament (where the word in Greek for angels is *angelos*). Both of these words have the same meaning – they mean a messenger. Angels are messengers of God. These beings serve as God's messengers to humanity. So what we have described here is a higher order of spiritual beings that dwell in the very presence of God and that serve his purposes. We're talking here about incorporeal beings; that is to say beings without physical bodies, or minds as it were without bodies, that is to say unembodied minds who serve the Lord.

In addition to the angels that serve the Lord and stand in his presence, there are, apparently as well, evil angels. Matthew 25:41 refers to these. Jesus is speaking here of the Last Judgement, and he says that God, the King of Heaven, "will say to those on his

left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’” So according to Jesus, there is a devil – a spiritual being of intense evil as we’ll see – who has angels that serve him as well. We’re talking about a higher order of reality that is not part of the physical universe but nonetheless is still a part of the created order.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Making a distinction between Satan’s angels, fallen angels, and demons themselves – are they going to be all more or less one?

*Dr. Craig:* We are going to have to talk about that more later on. I realize that just in this introduction that we haven’t differentiated sufficiently to understand the origin of these demonic beings, these evil beings, but they are referred to as angels, as I say, and they do seem to be of a similar type of being (this higher spiritual reality) that exists in addition to the physical creation. So for the time being we’re not going to differentiate between them but we will have to talk later on about that.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let’s talk then about the reasons for which angels exist. We might ask: why are there angels? Why would God create this higher order of spirit beings? Why are they there? Well, the primary reason seems to be simply to serve God. They are servants of God. In Hebrews 1:14, speaking of the angelic beings, the writer of Hebrews says, “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?” So the angelic beings serve as ministering spirits who serve God for the purpose of the plan of salvation for humanity.

A second reason that has been suggested for angelic beings is that they are mediators between God and the physical world. According to this view, God is a transcendent being beyond time and space. He is immaterial. He is pure spirit. So the suggestion here is that in order to communicate with and to work in the natural physical world, God has created these angelic beings to serve as mediators between the transcendent, immaterial, non-spatio-temporal realm, and the material spatio-temporal realm which we inhabit. I think, however, that this is not a good reason for thinking that angels exist because this seems to be susceptible to the so-called “third man argument.” What’s that? Plato similarly thought that there needed to be some kind of a liaison or a mediator between the realm of the Forms (which is the immaterial, eternally existing, abstract objects like geometrical shapes and other mathematical entities) and the physical world which we inhabit. So Plato posited a sort of demiurge, or intermediary, who would serve as the mediator between the immaterial, timeless Forms and the material physical world. But the problem with Plato’s view is that it immediately raises the question: well then who is the mediator between the timeless, spiritual reality and the intermediary being – the demiurge? You would still need to have another mediator between God and the demiurge, or the

intermediate being, and so on and so on *ad infinitum*. In other words, it would launch you into a sort of infinite regress of mediators between mediators between mediators and so forth. So I don't think there's any reason to think that God cannot, and often does not, act immediately in the spatio-temporal world. In fact, when we looked at miracles we saw that this is exactly what miracles are – God's intervention or action in the natural world. So there's really no need of having some sort of a mediator between God and the universe in order for God to act in the universe. Otherwise there would have to be some sort of mediator between him and the angels in order for him to act upon the angels, and that leads to an infinite regress. I think it's better to refer to the angels, not as mediators between God and man, but rather as manifestors of God to man. God is a transcendent spiritual reality, and he can use angels as a means of manifesting his presence in the universe. So they manifest God's being to us in various ways in many cases.

Related to this second rationale might be a similar reason for the existence of angels that was very prominent in medieval theology often referred to as The Great Chain of Being, to borrow the words of the author Arthur Lovejoy.<sup>63</sup> Lovejoy points out that for medieval theologians creation imitates God, and God (as an infinite being) is manifested in the world in manifold ways whereby the creation imitates his greatness and power and goodness and so forth. So there is this Great Chain of Being descending from God as the ultimate spiritual reality all the way down to the lowliest non-sentient physical things in the world. In between we find all sorts of different sorts of beings. For example, above the non-sentient physical beings you would have sentient physical beings like ourselves – beings which are composites of body and soul. So human beings would occupy that link in the Great Chain of Being between God and non-sentient physical things. But then higher than human beings would be creatures that are pure spirits without bodies like angelic beings who are finite spirit beings. And then even higher than them you would have God who is an infinite spirit being. So we, as human beings, are spirits which are corporally embodied, but angels would be spirits which are not embodied – they are pure spirits, pure minds that are not embodied in any sort of physical way. So there is a kind of chain of being the descends from God as pure infinite spirit down to purely material objects in which angels occupy an intermediate position in this Great Chain of Being. I'm not suggesting that they need to exist in order for God to mediate himself to creation. I have already rejected that suggestion. But rather that they simply express the fullness of creation in imitating God and in reflecting his manifold greatness.

Finally, the third purpose which angels can be thought to serve is the purpose of glorifying God. According to the Scripture, the throne of God is surrounded by angelic beings who constantly worship him singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of

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<sup>63</sup> see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, (Harvard University Press, 1936).

Hosts.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, one of the names of God in the Scriptures is “The Lord of Hosts” thereby referring to the innumerable angelic beings that worship God and glorify him – the hosts of heaven. So even in the absence of human praise and worship, there is an incomprehensible horde of angelic beings that constantly glorify and worship God.

So those would be three reasons for which angels might be created by God: to be servants for him for the sake of human beings whom he is bringing to salvation, as manifestors of his presence in the universe, and then simply to glorify and worship him.

Let's go on and talk further about the nature of angels.

The first point that I want to make is that angels are indeed created beings. Angels are not eternal. They have not existed forever. Nor are they metaphysically necessary in their being – they are contingent beings; they are part of the created order. They're not just part of the spatio-temporal universe, but nonetheless they are a higher spiritual sphere of reality that exists in addition to the universe. So they are part of creation even though they're not part of the universe. Colossians 1:16 speaks of this sphere of reality. Paul is talking here about how all things are created in Christ, and he says in Colossians 1:16, “in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.” So in differentiating between the visible and the invisible, between things in heaven and things on Earth, Paul is clearly talking about these two spheres of reality – the spiritual, invisible, heavenly sphere and then the physical, visible, tangible sphere. So the thrones and dominions and principalities and authorities that Paul speaks of are not simply physical rulers or governments here on Earth; rather, they are spiritual realities – the hosts of angelic beings which are the principalities and powers that God has also created.

Secondly, these beings are innumerable. That is to say, there are so many of them that no human being can count them all. In Daniel 7:10 we have described Daniel's vision of God as the Ancient of Days and the presentation before God of the Son of Man. In Daniel 7:10 he says of God, “A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.” Here Daniel sees this angelic horde that is beyond description in its multitude – thousands and thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand – more than Daniel can even count. Also in Hebrews 12:22 we have this adjective used to describe the angelic plenitude: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.” Here in the vision of the heavenly city there is also this host of angels which he calls innumerable – innumerable angels in festal gathering. So there aren't just a few

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<sup>64</sup> cf. Isaiah 6:1-4.

of these angelic beings; rather, there is a plenitude that is beyond human comprehension and counting.

Moreover, thirdly, these angelic beings are of different orders and ranks. They are apparently not all the same. Rather, there are some that are more powerful and authoritative whereas others are weaker and subordinate angelic beings. We've already seen this suggested in Paul's referring to the principalities and thrones and powers. But we see this illustrated very clearly in Daniel 10:13. This is a very peculiar passage where Daniel has been praying for a certain request, and the answer to his prayer has been delayed. Then he receives an angelic visitor who says in Daniel 10:12-14a,

Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia and came to make you understand what is to befall your people in the latter days.

In this really interesting story the angel says to Daniel, *Don't think that your prayer hasn't been heard because of the delay in its answer; rather, your prayer has been heard right from the very beginning, but for three weeks I've been held up by doing battle with the prince of the kingdom of Persia.* Now, this is clearly not talking about some earthly prince. This is talking about some sort of angelic being which was somehow connected with the kingdom of Persia. And the angel says that fortunately Michael (who is lauded as one of the chief princes) came to help him. So this angel was able to escape, and he left Michael to fight against the prince of the kingdom of Persia so that he's now able to come and answer Daniel's prayer. I think it makes it very evident that we're dealing here with a sort of hierarchy of these spiritual beings who are vested with different degrees of power and authority.

We see this same truth in the New Testament in the little book of Jude. If you look at the ninth verse of the book of Jude, it refers again to this same angel named Michael. Jude verse 9 says, "But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" This is interesting because we have here exactly the same person mentioned – Michael – and he is referred to in Jude not simply as an angel but as an archangel and therefore higher in rank just as he is portrayed in Daniel as one of the chief princes. He's a powerful, spiritual being who could do battle with the prince of the kingdom of Persia for he is an archangel. And yet notice that in contending with Satan Michael did not dare to pronounce a reviling judgment upon Satan; rather, he said, "The Lord rebuke you." Why? Because he was himself inferior to this powerful spiritual being

called the devil. So even Michael couldn't presume to rebuke the devil or to contend with him in his own authority, and so he appealed to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Lord, to rebuke Satan. So we're not dealing here simply with a plenitude of finite spiritual beings all on the same plane. Rather, they are ranked in terms of power and authority.

Fourthly, these beings are extremely powerful. 2 Thessalonians 1:7 speaks of the return of Christ, and Paul says here, "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire." It's the adjective "mighty" that I want you to focus on. He refers to these angels as powerful or mighty beings who will accompany Christ at his second return. 2 Kings 19:35 gives us some indication of just how powerful they are. 2 Kings 19:35, when God delivers the armies of Israel from the army of Assyria, we read as follows: "And that night the angel of the LORD went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies." In this one night the destroying angel attacked the camp of the Assyrians and killed 185,000 of these soldiers. That gives you some indication of the extraordinary power of these angelic creatures. Finally, Psalm 103:20 says, "Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!" Here again the angels are referred to as mighty ones indicating their extraordinary power.

Next, they are, as I've already said, spirits without material bodies. They are spiritual beings who do not properly have material bodies. Hebrews 1:14 again, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve?" So these are spiritual beings – just as God is spirit, so these beings are spirit. They're not corporeal entities.

2 Kings 6:8-18 gives us a very dramatic story about the reality of this invisible spiritual realm:

Once when the king of Syria was warring against Israel, he took counsel with his servants, saying, "At such and such a place shall be my camp." But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, "Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Syrians are going down there." And the king of Israel sent to the place of which the man of God told him. Thus he used to warn him, so that he saved himself there more than once or twice. And the mind of the king of Syria was greatly troubled because of this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, "Will you not show me who of us is for the king of Israel?"

*[In other words, he's demanding to know who is the one that is leaking this information. There are leakers in his administration – who is the spy in our midst?]*

And one of his servants said, "None, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber."



*[So he says it is the prophet of Israel that has this kind of clairvoyant knowledge – he knows what the king is saying in the privacy of his own bedroom and is able to disclose it to the king of Israel. So there is no spy, there is no one leaking; it is through divine clairvoyance.]*

And he said, “Go and see where he is, that I may send and seize him.” It was told him, “Behold, he is in Dothan.” So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army; and they came by night, and surrounded the city.

*[So he sends this army of soldiers to seize Elisha and take him back.]*

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was round about the city. And the servant said, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” He said, “Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

*[At this point the servant probably thinks, “What are you talking about? There is nobody with us; we are here by ourselves! And we are surrounded by this Syrian army!”]*

Then Elisha prayed, and said, “O LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, “Strike this people, I pray thee, with blindness.” So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha.

Here is described this invisible horde of the hosts of God – the armies of Yahweh – who are doing battle for Elisha and preserving his life even though to the young man with Elisha, and to the Syrian soldiers who were all around them, it appeared as though there was nobody there at all. They were invisible. They were spiritual beings who were present and powerful, but they couldn't be seen because they don't have bodies and therefore do not reflect photons that could enter anyone's eyes and impinge upon their retinas so that they could be seen. The young man needed to have a spiritual vision from God in order to see the hosts of God and the armies of Yahweh that were surrounding them and protecting them.

When you think about this, we simply don't know what spiritual hosts might be with us even right now in this very room protecting us from harm, warding off evil and powers of darkness, that would otherwise want to attack and undo us.

Next: these angels, precisely because they are pure spirits and incorporeal, are not bound by physical limitations. They are not bound by the limits of material spatial dimensions



or obstacles. Acts 12:5-10 gives us a good indication of this. This is the story of Peter's miraculous release from prison. Acts 12:5-10 says,

So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. The very night when Herod was about to bring him out, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison; and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your mantle around you and follow me." And he went out and followed him; he did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel left him.

Here Peter is locked in prison. He is chained and guarded. There is no way that a physical angel could get in to help him. But what happens is that the angel just appears in the room seemingly out of nowhere. He doesn't pass through the walls. He doesn't go through the doors. He just appears at this point in space. And then after miraculously freeing Peter he just vanishes – he disappears. It's very reminiscent of the way in which the risen Jesus could appear and disappear in his resurrection body. He seemed to have the ability to step in and out of this space-time manifold as he willed. He could just step into it at one point and then go out of it and step back into it at another point without traversing the distance in between. As spiritual beings these creatures are not bound by the kinds of spatial and physical limitations that we corporeal beings are. So the angel can just appear in the locked cell, and when his work is done he can just dematerialize and disappear again.

These angelic beings are not simply very powerful, they are also apparently very wise. 2 Samuel 14:20b – a woman is speaking to King David and she says to David, "my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth." Here she speaks of the angel of God as incredibly wise, knowing all things that are going on, and she flatters David by comparing David's knowledge to the knowledge of God's angel.

Finally, as we've already seen, these spiritual beings are capable of assuming human form. Even though they are immaterial spirits, they can, as it were, materialize and take on a human body or some other corporeal form. An example of this would be found in Judges 13:8-20. Here is described an appearance of an angelic being to Manoah and his wife who were to be the parents of Samson. In Judges 13:8-20 we read the following:

Then Manoah entreated the LORD, and said, “O, LORD, I pray thee, let the man of God whom thou didst send come again to us, and teach us what we are to do with the boy that will be born.” And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her. And the woman ran in haste and told her husband, “Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me.” And Manoah arose and went after his wife, and came to the man and said to him, “Are you the man who spoke to this woman?” And he said, “I am.” And Manoah said, “Now when your words come true, what is to be the boy's manner of life, and what is he to do?” And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “Of all that I said to the woman let her beware. She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing; all that I commanded her let her observe.” Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “Pray, let us detain you, and prepare a kid for you.” And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “If you detain me, I will not eat of your food; but if you make ready a burnt offering, then offer it to the LORD.” (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.) And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?” And the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” So Manoah took the kid with the cereal offering, and offered it upon the rock to the LORD, to him who works wonders. And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground.

In this story, the angel appears to Manoah and his wife as an ordinary human being. He looks so ordinary that Manoah doesn't even realize that he's talking to an angel. He looks just like a flesh-and-blood human being – a visitor or stranger – who has happened their way and has given them this prophecy. Manoah wants to honor him by preparing a meal for him. He has no idea that he's dealing with the angel of the Lord. In fact, look at what it says in Hebrews 13:1-2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Maybe the author of Hebrews is thinking of this story with Manoah and his wife. He says, *Show hospitality – you never know who it might be that you're entertaining. The stranger that you're welcoming could well be an angel.* So, although these are spiritual beings, they can assume different forms so that they would look just like an ordinary person. Admittedly, at other times in the Scriptures (for example, in the book of Revelation), you have them assuming other forms – for example, as having wings or other appendages to describe the bodily form that they took. So, although they are spirit beings, they can take on a material form in the universe that

differs in its appearance and then do things in the physical spatial-temporal world. And by assuming a human form, they could move objects or destroy things or open prison doors or things of that sort.

Next time we will look at the work of angels, but it's my hope that our discussion this morning has helped to increase your consciousness and your awareness of these unseen realms that surround us, that protect us and guide us, so that we can be given additional confidence and courage to face the obstacles that we do in our day-to-day lives.<sup>65</sup>

## Lecture 20: The Work of Angels

We have been thinking about angels and demons. Last time we looked at the nature of these angelic beings. Today we want to say something more about the work of angels – what do they do?

First of all, *angels seem to guide the destiny of nations*. In the book of Daniel, it appears that there are angels which are peculiarly linked to various nations and which influence those nations. In Daniel 10:13-20, the angel speaks to Daniel as follows:

“The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia and came to make you understand what is to befall your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come.” When he had spoken to me according to these words, I turned my face toward the ground and was dumb. And behold, one in the likeness of the sons of men touched my lips; then I opened my mouth and spoke. I said to him who stood before me, “O my lord, by reason of the vision pains have come upon me, and I retain no strength. How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.” Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. And he said, “O man greatly beloved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.” And when he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.” Then he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I am through with him, lo, the prince of Greece will come.”

So here you have angelic beings mentioned in connection with three nations. You have the prince of Persia, you have the angel associated with Israel, and then you have the prince of Greece who is going to do battle with the angel of Israel. So it would seem that in these unseen realms these angelic beings have special connections with various nations and actually do battle with one another.

Secondly, *angels minister to the people of God*. Hebrews 1:14, which we've read before, says, “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?” This is a verse that is about us; that is to say, the church. Angels are ministering spirits who are sent to serve the people of God. We find an illustration of this role in 1 Kings 19:5-8. This is the story of Elijah's flight. It says,

And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time, and touched him,

and said, “Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you.” And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

Here the angel ministers to Elijah in the very practical way of providing him with food and drink. We have the same thing in the life of Jesus in Matthew 4:11. This is the incident that comes at the end of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness after he has fasted for forty days and forty nights. In Matthew 4:11 it says, “The devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.” The word “ministered” here is typically used to mean “to serve food and drink.” It is what a servant does at tables. So, in the same way that Elijah was ministered to by the angel, so Jesus, having fasted for forty days and forty nights and being tempted by the devil, is ministered to by angels in the provision of food and drink.

A different sort of ministration is in view in Luke 22:43. Here is the story of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane where an angel ministers to him. Luke 22:43 might not be in the text of some of your Bibles, but it may be in the footnote to your text. This verse appears in very ancient manuscripts which are very likely reliable and so this verse should actually be part of the text of the Gospel of Luke. It says in Luke 22:43,

And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Here you have again the angel ministering to Jesus in the time of his greatest need in the Garden as he was facing the cross. The angel strengthens him for this purpose.

In Psalm 91:9-12 we have a general promise in this regard:

Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your habitation, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.

Here angels are described as protecting the people of God, perhaps from spiritual warfare with invisible demons that would seek to do us harm. We have no idea of the protection that angels may afford us in this sort of invisible spiritual warfare.

Thirdly, *angels execute God’s justice*. We have an illustration of this work of angels in 2 Kings 19:35: “And that night the angel of the LORD went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.” Here God metes out his judgment upon the enemies of Israel, but he does so not immediately but rather through the process of a destroying angel.

In the New Testament, you have an example of this role of angels in Acts 12:23. This is a passage that describes the death of Herod. Acts 12:21-23 says,

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and made an oration to them. And the people shouted, “The voice of a god, and not of man!” Immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he did not give God the glory; and he was eaten by worms and died.

This is another example of God’s justice being meted out upon the enemies of God’s people by means of an angel.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 speaks of the final judgment which will also involve angels. Paul is speaking here of the righteous judgment of God, and he says that God will

grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Here the angels will be involved in the second coming of Christ and in his meting out judgment upon those who do not believe the Gospel and who reject God.

Finally, Revelation 16:1 says, “Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, ‘Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.’” Then the passage goes on to describe how the first angel, and then the second angel, and then the third angel each went out and poured out the bowls of God’s wrath upon the Earth which are symbolic of God’s judgment upon the Earth. So the angels are instruments of God’s justice and judgment upon unbelief.

Fourthly, *angels will both gather Christians and accompany Christians at the second coming of Christ.* The angels will gather living Christians and also accompany those Christians who are deceased and who are with the Lord at the time of Christ’s return. Look, for example, at Matthew 24:29-31:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Here at the return of Christ – his second coming – his angels will go out and gather all of the living Christians at that time into the new Kingdom which Christ is bringing.

These angels who accompany Christ when he comes again will also accompany the souls of the dead in Christ to be reunited with their resurrection bodies. Matthew 25:31 says, “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.” So this verse describes the angels who will accompany Christ at the time of his return to inaugurate his Kingdom.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, Paul gives an extended disquisition on this subject. Paul writes,

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Notice here that the angels do more than just gather the elect who are living at the time of Christ’s return, but they also accompany the souls of the dead in Christ. Paul says that those who have died in Christ – those who have fallen asleep – will precede us who are alive at the time of Christ’s return in being gathered into the Kingdom with Christ. The Lord will come with the archangel’s call and with the souls of the dead in Christ, and then those who are alive shall be transformed and ushered into the Kingdom. Similarly, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8, to read this verse again, says that God will

grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

This verse is simply confirmation of the involvement of angels at the time of the second coming of Christ – in this case in meting out God’s judgment upon unbelief.

So at the time of the second coming, angels will accompany the dead in Christ as their souls are reunited with their resurrection bodies. And then the angels will gather the living Christians from the corners of the Earth, and similarly they will be transformed into their resurrection bodies. And so we shall always be with the Lord.

This is some of the work of angels in the Bible.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Angels were also givers of the law. Did you go over that?



*Dr. Craig:* I did not, but there are a couple of passages in the New Testament where Paul talks about the message delivered by angels. The law. The author of Hebrews says the same. That's true. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. But that would be another role in which angels were involved in the Old Testament – to give the law.

*Student:* That's interesting because it's not clear in the Old Testament but it is mentioned in the New Testament.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, that's the oddity, isn't it? There was evidently a tradition that arose that the New Testament writers were aware of that isn't recorded in the actual narratives of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's take a look at the work of two very special angels – the only two who serve the Lord that are actually named in the Bible, namely Michael and Gabriel. It just occurred to me that those are the names of two of our key employees with Reasonable Faith – our executive director and social media director Michael and Gabriel! So we've got namesakes of angels working with Reasonable Faith. Later we'll look at the figure of Satan and try to understand him and the demons in relation to angelic beings, but we want to look here at these two persons of Michael and Gabriel.

Out of all of the myriads of angelic hosts that serve the Lord, only two are actually named in the scripture: Michael and Gabriel. They are named several times in Scripture, both in the Old Testament and then again in the New Testament.

Let's take a look first at the angel Michael who is mentioned first in the book of Daniel – Daniel 10:13-20. We've already looked at this passage. In Daniel 10:13, Daniel receives a revelation from an angel who comes to him and reports, “The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia.” Here Michael is identified as one of the chief princes of the angels – one who is extremely powerful and who is therefore able to do battle with the prince of Persia who had stymied the angelic messenger who had been sent to Daniel. Then in Daniel 10:21 he's told, “But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince.” Here in Daniel 10:21 Michael is mentioned for a second time as the prince who is associated with Daniel and presumably with his people. He is referred to as “your prince” in speaking to Daniel. Then in Daniel 12:1-2 Michael is mentioned again:

At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people.  
And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one

whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Here Michael is explicitly associated with the kingdom of Israel. He is the prince who has charge of God's people, Israel. And he is involved with the final resurrection of the dead. So already in the Old Testament Michael is known as one of the chief of the angelic beings. He's mentioned again, as I've indicated in previous lessons, in the New Testament in Jude 9. This is the story of Michael's contending with Satan. It says,

But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."

Remember that in the book of Daniel Michael is referred to as one of the chief princes of the angels. Here he is referred to as an archangel indicating his higher rank and authority. His tremendous power is evident in that he is able to contend with Satan himself in the ninth verse of the book of Jude.

Michael's status as a warrior is also evident in Revelation 12:7-8:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

This passage also refers to the archangel Michael warring against Satan and of Satan's being cast out of heaven.

These are the biblical passages that specifically mention Michael.

The other angel that is mentioned specifically is the angel named Gabriel. He also appears in the book of Daniel in Daniel 8:16-17. We read,

And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the U'lai, and it called, "Gabriel, make this man understand the vision." So he came near where I stood; and when he came, I was frightened and fell upon my face. But he said to me, "Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end."

Here Daniel has a vision of an angelic person that is identified as Gabriel. This angel also appears again in the next chapter in Daniel – Daniel 9:20-22 – where Daniel recounts:

While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy hill of my God; while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice.

He came and he said to me, “O Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding.

Here Gabriel appears to Daniel in some sort of human form. He is called “the man” Gabriel. But the term “in flight” indicates that we are talking about an angelic being and not a mere human being.

This same angel named Gabriel again appears in the New Testament in the Gospel of Luke in the story of the annunciation. He announces both the birth of John the Baptist and then also of Jesus himself. Luke 1:19 is the first of these stories. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, has a vision, and he says to the angel in verse 18, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” *How can we have a child?* he wants to know. Then in Luke 1:19-20,

And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”

Here again we see, as in the case of Michael, the very exalted status of this angel. Gabriel is described here as one who stands in the very presence of God.

So evidently both Michael (who is an archangel and one of the chief princes) and Gabriel are angels who have very high status and rank before God.

Then in Luke 1:26-27 we read that, “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.” And then you have the story of the annunciation of the birth of Christ.

So it's quite remarkable, I think, that we have these two angels both mentioned by name in the book of Daniel carrying out various functions and then again they reappear in the New Testament. If we look at the roles that they play, it would seem that Michael is the warrior (the one who does battle), whereas Gabriel seems to be the messenger (he is not the one engaged in warfare as Michael is, but the one in communicating wisdom and understanding to God's people).

These are the only references to Michael and Gabriel in the Bible, or to any other angel by name. But at least the identity of these two extremely exalted angels is made known to us in Scripture.

Next time we will take up the subject of Satan and his demons.<sup>66</sup>

## Lecture 21: The Names of Satan

Today we come to the section of the lesson dealing with Satan and the demons. We've been talking about angels which serve God, but not all angels do. You also have a spiritual being referred to as the devil, or Satan, in Scripture, and the demonic hordes which serve his destructive purposes. So let's talk first a bit about the names of this person.

The principal name given to the spiritual being that opposes God is Satan. This is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew and Greek words for this individual: in Hebrew, *Satan*, and in Greek, *Satanas*. The word "Satan" means "adversary" in both languages – in both the Old and New Testaments. The word for Satan is used fourteen times in the opening chapters of the book of Job to denote this supernatural being which is opposing God. Let me read Job 1:6-12:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "Whence have you come?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nought? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand." So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord.

Here Satan is described as being among the company of the sons of God in heaven.

The same word is similarly used three times in Zechariah 3:1-2. It says,

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan!"

In these passages the word "Satan" appears with the definite article – "the" Satan – meaning the adversary or the accuser who is opposed to God. So it's not simply a proper name. It's a kind of descriptive term as well – the adversary, the accuser.

In the New Testament, the word *diabolos* is also used for this person. *Diabolos* means "the devil" or "slanderer." For example, 1 Peter 5:8 says, "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour." Here our adversary, or Satan, is described as the devil.

Sometimes Satan is given another name in Scripture – *Beelzebub*, or a variant, *Beelzebul*. This term is derived from the Canaanite deity Baal. For example, Matthew 12:24 says, “But when the Pharisees heard it they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.’” They thought that Jesus in casting out demons was acting in the authority of Beelzebul, who they identify as the prince of demons. Similarly, Jesus in Matthew 10:25 goes on to admonish his disciples: “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household?”

The term *Baal-Zebub*, from which this is derived, means the Lord Prince. He is a Philistine god, part of the pantheon of gods of Israel's neighbors. The people of Israel regarded the Philistines as worshiping not the same God that they did, rather in effect they said they're worshiping Satan. Baal-Zebub is, in fact, the prince of demons. Paul similarly thought that the devotees of Greco-Roman religions were not regarded as worshiping God, but as, in fact, worshiping demons rather than God. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:20-21 Paul says flatly,

. . . what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

So much for religious pluralism! Paul, like his fellow Jews, regarded these pagan deities as demonic.

Satan is also called a liar and a murderer in John 8:44. Jesus says,

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

In Ephesians 2:2, Satan is called the prince of the power of the air. Ephesians 2:1b-2 says,

. . . when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

Here you have Satan (or the devil) referred to as a prince much as the angels are sometimes referred to as princes. He is a spiritual being of enormous power and authority.

In fact, he is called the ruler of this world in John 14:30-31. Jesus says,

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.

Here Satan is described by Jesus as the ruler of this world. That's a very sobering title for Satan. Similarly, 1 John 5:19: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." We often think of God as the ruler of this world who has authority over the world in which we live. But John says that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one – that he is, in fact, the ruler of this world. So in a very real sense we are living in enemy territory. We are, in fact, living behind enemy lines in this world. In fact, Satan is even called the god of this world in 2 Corinthians 4:4. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, speaking of unbelievers, Paul says,

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.

Here Satan is called the god of this world.

So we've seen that he's called the ruler of this world, that the whole world lies in his power, and here he's actually referred to as the god of this world who blinds the minds of unbelievers to prevent them from receiving the Gospel of Christ. So it gives you some understanding of the incredible power and authority of this being.

In 1 Thessalonians 3:5 he is called the tempter. Paul says,

For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent that I might know your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor would be in vain.

Paul feared that his fledgling church would have been led astray into heresy by the temptation of Satan. So Satan is also one who tempts Christians with a view toward destroying them and bringing about their lapse from the true faith.

In Revelation 20:2-3a we have a whole series of titles given to Satan. I quote:

And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more . . .

Here he is referred to as "the dragon." "That ancient serpent" is perhaps a reference back to the serpent in the Garden of Eden who deceived Adam and Eve. He's called "the devil" and "Satan."

Revelation 12:10 echoes Zechariah 3:1-2 that we've already read:

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

Here he's referred to as the accuser of the brethren just as in Zechariah 3. He was accusing the high priest Joshua before the Lord.

So I think you can see that this adversary, or Satan, is referred to in Scripture by quite a large number of names and titles. He's called Beelzebub, the devil, the liar, the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this world, the god of this world, your adversary, the dragon, the ancient serpent, Satan, and the tempter. All of these go to describe the spiritual being that is bent upon the destruction of God's work and his Kingdom in the world.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Could you just comment on Isaiah 14:12, specifically only the King James Version where it says, “how art thou fallen from heaven o Lucifer,” which really only just means “day star” though? But I just find it interesting how a lot of people in our culture think his name is Lucifer, and it's only because of the King James Version because of what I think comes from the Latin Vulgate – the way they translate the word “day star.”

*Dr. Craig:* I will say something about this in a moment when we talk about the origin of Satan. But you're right. In the Isaiah 14 passage it refers to him as a “day star” or “bright morning star” which, as you indicate, can be rendered as this proper name, Lucifer. But it actually is using the metaphor of a morning star like Venus in the morning to describe the person that's being addressed there. I'll talk about that in a moment. Hang on.

*Student:* Do you see these names (or any of these names) as being a proper name for Satan or are they just descriptions like “adversary?” Satan means adversary.

*Dr. Craig:* This is a good question. I do think that Satan is both a proper name and a description. It does appear with the definite article like “the adversary” but it can also be a proper name in the same way we can use the word “President” as a proper name. We can either talk about “the President” or we can say “Mr. President” and use it as a kind of proper name. So I think there are proper names that are also descriptions, and that would seem to be the case with Satan. Beelzebub is certainly a proper name. That would be a proper name springing from Baal.

*Student:* Given the name was “god of this world,” to me would indicate that when God created the world it was good, but when man fell is it not saying that not only man fell but that the whole world fell and Satan was allowed to – God allowed him to – possess the world as he allowed him access to Job? Is that an accurate depiction of how that term could be used?

*Dr. Craig:* I think we have to say that it's conjectural. It's speculative. The speculation, I think, that you quite rightly raise here is – do you remember we saw before that there



were certain angelic beings that were associated with certain nations like the prince of Persia, the prince of Greece, and Michael is the prince or angel of Israel? – could it have been that the proper province of pre-Fall Satan was the universe or the world (maybe the Earth depending on what “the world” refers to here)? That he had been assigned the Earth as his province? And then he falls, and so now the ruler of this age is incredibly wicked and is leading the world astray against God. Or is it rather that Satan, being cast out of heaven, comes to the Earth and there usurps the authority of God and challenges God by asserting his own authority? I don't think we know. You see the difference between the two. Is his being the ruler of this world a function of his original pre-Fall assignment? Or is it a function of his later usurping authority over the Earth? I don't see any way to answer that question.

*Student:* But it does say in Scripture that creation is yearning or to relieve itself of this curse, it seems to me (I'm not sure the exact words used). But it was as if it's under duress.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, Romans 8. Paul speaks of this. How the whole creation groans in travail like a woman in labor for its eventual deliverance and the revelation of the sons of God in glory. So it does seem to portray the whole of creation in travail, as you say.

*Student:* I would say all of these names . . . they become mediators between God and man. So when Satan was cast out, the mediators were removed, and that's why we have a thousand years he's bound. So you can say they became the god of the world because they inserted themselves between God and man. And Christ came to remove all mediators. Now there's only the mediator of Christ to man.

*Dr. Craig:* I don't think that that role is ever assigned to Satan in Scripture as far as I know – that he's called mediator or anything of that sort. It seems to me that quite the opposite – he is usurping authority. He is inserting himself into things that he doesn't belong, but he's not mediating between us and God.

*Student:* [off-mic]

*Dr. Craig:* OK, he said that he inserts himself in between us and God, in effect becoming a sort of god to the unbeliever. Just so long as we don't think . . . I think mediation is just the wrong word to use here. I think it would be more like a rebel who's trying to overthrow the government and set up a false regime in its place.

*Student:* I'm curious as to why you want to read the phrase “the ruler of this world” or “god of this world” literally. When I read that I tend to read that in terms of being hyperbole, that he is saying that Satan has tremendous influence over . . .

*Dr. Craig:* It does seem to be confirmed by the passage in 1 John where he says that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one, and then he's called the ruler of this world

as well as the god of this world. So you've got several scriptural passages that seem to suggest that he's in control here; that he's controlling how things are going. Now, of course, this is only within the overall providence of God, but it would make more intelligible why there is so much evil and horror in this world. We are living in a world that is under the control of this malevolent being that is opposed to God and his purposes.

*Student:* I played Jeopardy on Alexa, and earlier this week they had a question about Beelzebub and described the translation to be “Lord of the Flies” which speaks to the book. So is “Lord of the Flies” not a correct translation?

*Dr. Craig:* It is a correct translation of this variant, Beelzebul, which appears in 2 Kings 1:2 and in the passage we read from Matthew. That literally means, not “Lord Prince,” it means “Lord of the Flies,” and it was probably a way of belittling this Canaanite deity for the Jews to call him Beelzebul. He's just the lord of flies. Of course this title was picked up by William Golding in this powerful novel that describes a group of English schoolboys who were marooned on an island and degenerate into these savages that are about to kill each other before they're rescued, thereby illustrating the inherent fallenness and sinfulness of human beings. If you haven't read Golding's novel, you should read it or see the movie which is also stunning and very gripping. But it so illustrates again the hold that evil has upon humanity in showing the evil that is inherent in these seemingly innocent boys.

*Student:* The comment that Satan is in control of this world seems to be in direct conflict with the book of Job where Satan told God, *you built a hedge around him*. That would indicate that he couldn't cross. Comments?

*Dr. Craig:* Well, I would say that Job does illustrate how God gives Satan scope to do these evil, horrible things to Job, but only within the limits set by God. Remember our lessons on divine providence, how (especially on a Molinist view) everything that happens is either by God's direct will or permission. So ultimately God is in control, but he allows this renegade demon to wreak havoc throughout the Earth upon humanity but only insofar as will redound ultimately to God's saving purposes for establishing his Kingdom. So please don't misunderstand me to think that I'm saying God isn't in control.

## **END DISCUSSION**

As we've seen then, Satan is presented as this powerful and evil adversary of the work of God and the Kingdom of God with whom we have to contend. This naturally raises the inevitable question as to the origin of this being. Since God is not evil and does not create evil, how is it that there could even be such a creature as this? How could there be such a being as Satan? When God created the world in Genesis chapter 1, it says that he looked at creation and saw that it was very good. Everything was good. So how do you explain

the origin of someone like Satan and the demons that follow him? That is the question that we will take up next week.<sup>67</sup>

## Lecture 22: The Origin of Satan

We finished our lesson last time by raising the question of the origin of Satan. Satan, as we've seen, is presented as a tremendous adversary of the work and Kingdom of God with whom we have to contend. This raises the obvious question of the origin of this being. Since God is not evil and cannot create evil, then how could there be such a being as Satan? When God created in Genesis 1 it says that he looked at creation and he saw that it was all very good. So how do you explain the origin of someone like Satan and the demons?

One thing that is very clear that we need to insist upon is that Scripture does not teach some sort of dualism. It does not teach that there is God and anti-God who is equal and opposed to God; that there is light and there is darkness and that these are equally opposed to each other. This dualistic view is completely foreign to both Judaism and Christianity which think of God as the sole source of all reality outside himself. Anything that is not God – anything that exists other than God – is created by God. There isn't any reality apart from God that is uncreated. This is the burden of my book *God Over All* which defends God as the sole ultimate reality. So dualism is simply out of the question.

To give just one Scripture on this, consider Colossians 1:15-16. Speaking of Christ, it says:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, [then Paul begins to mention specifically these spiritual realms] visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Paul will talk elsewhere about these principalities and powers in reference to the demonic realms that exist, as well as the angelic realms. He is quite clear in Colossians that these things do not exist independently of Christ. Rather, they are all created through him. So dualism is simply out of the question. If there is such a being as Satan, and beings like his demons, then these are part of the created order. They were made by God. That's the clear implication here.

But that leaves us then with this very difficult question. How could God create something which seems to be so intrinsically evil and opposed to God? Unfortunately, this is not a question that is explicitly addressed in the Bible. Even in the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 there's no attempt to explain where the serpent or evil came from. Man is simply confronted with the serpent in the garden. So the best that we can do is to try to piece together various clues and intimations in Scripture and try to draw some tentative conclusions about this.

Some people have said that Isaiah 14:12-17 are a reference to the origin of Satan. We will read that together. Isaiah says,

How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit. Those who see you will stare at you, and ponder over you: 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?'

Some have said that this language could not be used to describe any human person. This is rather a description of Satan when he was an angelic being who, through pride and vaulting ambition, opposed himself to God and so fell away. While I think that that view of the origin of Satan is probably close to the truth, I don't think that that is what Isaiah is talking about. As you can see from the beginning of chapter 14, this is a taunt that is directed against the king of Babylon. That's why in verses 16 and thereafter it says, "Is this the man who . . . shook kingdoms, . . . who . . . overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?" It's clearly talking about an earthly king whom Isaiah identifies as the king of Babylon. It is using hyperbolic language to describe the vaunting ambition and pride whereby the king of Babylon sets himself against God. So, while I think that the view expressed about the origin of Satan might well be correct, I'm very skeptical that this is what this passage is about.

Similarly, Ezekiel 28 has been interpreted to describe Satan's fall. Ezekiel 28:12-19 says,

You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, carnelian, topaz, and jasper, chrysolite, beryl, and onyx, sapphire, carbuncle, and emerald; and wrought in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. With an anointed guardian cherub I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you.

Here again the suggestion is that this is a description of Satan prior to the Fall – how he was originally created good and then he fell away and became evil. But once again the context of the passage doesn't support this. It sounds like it only if you read it out of context. If you look at verse 11, it says, "Moreover the word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the

Lord God.” And then the passage follows. So this is a lamentation over the city of Tyre, an earthly city. Similarly, in verse 16 it goes on to say,

In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and the guardian cherub drove you out from the midst of the stones of fire.

So here it's condemning him for his unfair trade practices in the commerce that was conducted by the king of Tyre. This wouldn't obviously be applicable to Satan. It goes on to condemn the other things that this king did which were wrong. So once again, I think when read in context, this is not a passage about Satan or his origin.

What some critics have claimed is that originally these passages were myths about some sort of angelic fall which the biblical prophets borrowed and demythologized in order to apply them to human kings. They took these pagan myths (which were about angels or humans falling away) and then they demythologized them and applied them to the king of Tyre and the king of Babylon. The problem with such a hypothesis is that it is ultimately untestable. Since we know of no such pagan myths in the ancient Near East, this theory is no better than conjecture. It is what might be called *nephelococcygia* about these texts. Now, in case you do not know the word “nephelococcygia,” this is a word which I encountered for the first time this week in reading an Old Testament scholar. It is finding shapes in the clouds. Nephelococcygia is finding shapes in the clouds. I think that is a good description for those who would attempt to discover these pre-biblical pagan myths that are not attested anywhere and therefore cannot be confirmed. It is literary nephelococcygia. In any case, the passage as we now have it is clearly not about an angelic fall. It's about earthly kings.

So, again, the suggestion of an angelic fall may be theologically correct, but I think it's eisegesis to read it into these passages. That is to say, the interpretation is not being read out of the text; it's being read into the text. It takes these passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel and in effect says that when read out of context they give us a really nice theory of Satan's origin if we interpret them as describing the devil's fall. But there's nothing in the context to suggest that this is, in fact, what the passages are about.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I kind of like these passages referring to Satan because these are parodies of Babylon and Tyre. I see these as inserts of this parody of what happened with Satan, because you also see in Daniel where you had watchers and you have over certain areas of the world and conflicts with Michael the Archangel and so forth. So these leaders are playing out Satan's plans and devices. So it doesn't seem a stretch that God would parody

...

*Dr. Craig:* Well, I guess my difficulty is that I just don't see anything in the context that would suggest that these are parodies of Satan's fall being applied to human beings. Why not instead just take it to be hyperbolic language that is applied to these kings rather than think that this is something that is about Satan when there's nothing in the context to suggest that?

*Student:* Well, you could except there's statements that can't apply to human beings.

*Dr. Craig:* Not literally, no. That's clear.

*Student:* I think part of what drives this tradition is that John Milton read these verses and that's how he got the idea for *Paradise Lost*. The fall of Satan is very vivid in *Paradise Lost*.

*Dr. Craig:* I've been reading Old Testament commentaries on the book of Genesis lately, and some of the commentators have mentioned that our views of Satan and the Fall of man are shaped more by John Milton's *Paradise Lost* than by the actual biblical narratives. It is a tremendous work that Milton wrote, and one of the greatest pieces of English literature, and it has had a profound effect that we may not even be conscious of. Thank you for making that point.

## **END DISCUSSION**

What other indications in Scripture are there about the origin of Satan from which we might make some intelligent inferences? Well, consider again the book of Job, chapter 1. Job 1:6 says: "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them." Then it goes on to tell the rest of the story. Here it seems to be talking about angelic beings who are presenting themselves before God, and Satan is there. This takes place in heaven because Satan responds to God's question about, *Where you have come from*, by saying, *I've come from going to and fro upon the Earth*. So this scene is not something that takes place on Earth. This is the heavenly throne room, so to speak, and here Satan appears to be included among the sons of God who are there. So he does seem to be some sort of an angelic being who has now set himself against God and in opposition to God.

With that in mind, go to the New Testament to Luke 10:17-18. This is the story of the disciples going out on their mission preaching the Gospel that Jesus has sent them on. When they return from their mission, in verse 17, it says: "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!' And he said to them, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.'" Is Jesus talking here about an angelic fall that he saw, perhaps in a pre-creation state; that he saw Satan fall from heaven? Or is he merely talking here about the way in which the demons were cast out by the disciples, and Jesus is reflecting on the triumph of their mission by saying, *I saw Satan fall like*



*lightning from heaven in what you did.* Well, it's unclear. We don't know for sure the correct interpretation. But at least we do have in this passage the idea clearly expressed of a satanic fall from heaven which Jesus mentions.

Now turn to 2 Peter 2:4. Here we have something a little bit more specific. The author says, "For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment. . . ." What is indicated clearly here is that there are angels who have sinned. This could well be a reference to the sons of God mating with human women in Genesis 6:1-4. But minimally I think at least it shows us that there are angels who have sinned. It says that these sons of God have been incarcerated in the underworld in some sort of nether darkness. Here we have some indication of the idea of an angelic fall that could be relevant to the origin of demons.

Also, in Jude verse 6 this same event is mentioned. That passage says,

And the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day.

Here again is an indication that there are angels who have sinned and fallen away and whom God has now imprisoned in the underworld until the judgment on the great day. These fallen angels seem to be incarcerated; they're not let out. But the speculation is that perhaps there are others who are free to roam upon the Earth, and that Satan and his minions are some of these. Satan also appears to be one of the company of angels. We saw that, for example, in the book of Jude in his contest with the archangel Michael. Jesus talks about Satan falling from heaven like lightning. So it could be that the origin of Satan and the demons lies in an angelic fall, and that some of them are still free (within limits) to work their wrath upon the Earth even though there are others who are kept in this underworld.

1 John 3:8 is also relevant. 1 John 3:8 says, "He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." Here again we have indication of sins that have been committed by Satan, by the devil, which would obviously result in a sort of fall. So we have evidence in Scripture, I think, of an angelic fall and specifically of sin on the part of Satan which would bring him into condemnation before God.

Another verse that might be relevant is 1 Timothy 3:6 which might tell us something about the sin of Satan. Paul is giving the qualifications here for someone who wants to be a bishop in the church, and he is warning against pride. He says that the candidate, "must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." The question is how do you interpret that phrase "the

condemnation of the devil.” Does it mean that the recent convert who gets puffed up with pride would then be condemned by the devil? That it is the devil who would condemn him? Or does it mean rather that he would fall into the same condemnation that the devil fell into, namely from being puffed up with pride and arrogance. Setting himself against God, he finds himself also condemned before God just like Satan. If we interpret the phrase in that latter way then this would suggest that the devil’s sin was indeed some sort of pride or arrogance whereby he raised his heel against his creator, against God, and so fell away.

Finally, 1 Timothy 5:21 says, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without favor, doing nothing from partiality.” The phrase I want to draw your attention to here is the phrase “the elect angels.” There are certain angels who are elect to glorification just as we are. We are among the elect – the chosen ones on this planet among human beings. But there are also elect angels, which implies that there are other angels which are not elect. They would be fallen angels and would be under God's condemnation.

So, all in all, I think there are scriptural hints or indications that the traditional understanding of Satan and the demons is very plausible, namely that originally God created a realm of angelic beings who were created good (they're not created evil) but who, through an exercise of free will, rebelled against God and so fell away and are condemned. And the Earth now lies under the power and sway of these demonic angels. Great news, isn't it? These fallen angels (or some of them at least) become what we would call demons.

This raises a deeper question: how could angels who are in the presence of God fall away? And is it possible that more angels might fall away in the future? What prevents the elect angels from sinning? On this matter, we can only offer plausible speculations. It seems that God would have to create the angels originally at a sort of epistemic distance – at arm's length, so to speak – so as to allow them the freedom to rebel against God and to sin. Having made their choice, the wills of the elect angels are then sealed in that choice by being given a fuller vision of God's greatness and glory so irresistible that further sin is impossible. So there is no danger of a further angelic fall. Their free choice having been made, their will is now sealed.

But then what about the fallen angels? Could they now freely turn to God in repentance and be saved? The church father Origen actually believed such a thing. Origen believed in the doctrine called *apocatastasis*, or the restoration of all things. He believed that in the end even Satan himself will be saved and that everything will be restored to its original good condition. But Origen's view was condemned as heretical by the church. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus refers to “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Notice the eternality of the punishment of the devil and the demons: “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Christ’s atoning death was offered on behalf of mankind, not on behalf of angels. So in that very peculiar sense, the doctrine of the limited atonement is true – it is limited to the human race and does not include angels.

In fact, medieval theologians like St. Anselm believed that the number of elect human beings was chosen by God to precisely replace the number of the angels who had fallen away, so that the complete number of the elect will be saved – human beings will be substituted in the place of those angels that fell away. So there is no availability of atonement or salvation for the demonic beings.

Lest anyone think it unloving on God’s part not to offer an atonement for the fallen angels, consider that God may know that Satan and the demons, having become evil, would never freely choose to repent and believe even if provision were made for them. So why make it?

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Many theologians believe that in the context of Revelation 12:4, when it says, “His tail,” (talking about the dragon, which is Satan or the devil), “swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth,” is a reference that one-third of the angels in heaven fell. I was wondering if you put much stock in that.

*Dr. Craig:* Let’s just turn to that passage – Revelation 12:4. I think that my reservation about that . . . to read the verse,

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman . . . with child, . . . And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. . . .

And then he threatens the child. I just don’t see any reason to think that this is talking about some pre-creation fall. This is in the context of an end-times vision of what’s going to happen in the future. So I’m very reluctant to take this symbolic narrative of what’s going to happen and project it into the past rather than into the future.

*Student:* I also had a question about Revelation 12 because in so many of the passages of Revelation 12 John goes back and forth between the past, and the present, and the future. He seems to shift. So along with the earlier question, what do you think about (especially with respect to time) verse 7 and verse 8 of that passage? Because it does sometimes . . . there’s some people that you read feel that some things could happen in the past, and some can come to the forward meaning that the great woman in Israel is going to be saved in the future. There’s one particular passage that seems to go back and forth in 12:12 quite a bit. So could that also relate to Satan originally?

*Dr. Craig:* Well, here we have this struggle between Michael and the dragon casting him down to Earth and so forth. I guess the question should be . . . I have always taken this as what John says at the beginning of the book, that the book is about, where he says that he's going to show him what is going to happen and that therefore these are all describing future events. But if you projected into the past then, yes, you could interpret that as being an angelic fall.

*Student:* I just wondered if it could be a panoramic in some areas in order to explain later on in the book what will be in the future to understand . . . you have to understand where Satan got where he was because he's the power of the prince of the air.

*Dr. Craig:* I don't know. I guess I would have to be convinced that there's some good reason to take it that way because the way he presents it is that this is a vision that God has given him of everything that is going to take place, and it would include things like this warfare and defeat of Satan so that these are things that haven't happened yet. But if you could convince me, I'm perfectly open to the idea. I've just not taken it that way.

*Student:* The false prophet and the beast – are those demonic creatures or is that fallen man?

*Dr. Craig:* I don't know for sure. I have always taken these to be human beings who again are described in this kind of hyperbolic, apocalyptic, symbolic language rather than thinking that these are demonic creatures or angelic creatures. I've taken them to be human persons. But that's sure not a hill I'm going to die on. Revelation is just notoriously difficult to interpret. It's so symbolic and filled with imagery, I think any interpreter of that book needs to be very tentative in the interpretations that he proposes.<sup>68</sup>

## Lecture 23: The Nature of Demons

It was interesting that the hymn that we sang mentioned angels. I hadn't noticed that before: *Angels will attend and help and comfort you until the end.*

We're thinking about angels and demons. Last week we looked at the origin of demons. Today we want to talk about the nature of demonic beings.

First of all, they clearly are intelligent beings. Acts 16:16-18 indicates that demonic beings are intelligent and personal beings. Luke writes,

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us, crying, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

In this story we see that this girl had a demonic spirit of divination (that is to say, the ability to tell the future or to tell people's fortunes), and so obviously the demon that possessed her was an intelligent and spiritual being which resided within her body.

Also, 2 Corinthians 11:3 and then verses 13 and 15. Paul says,

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. . . . For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

In this passage we see once again the deceitfulness, the cleverness, and the cunning of Satan in deceiving people and leading them astray. This obviously implies that he is an intelligent being who is able to deceive people and turn them away from the truth.

Finally, Revelation 12:9: "And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him." Here Satan is referred to as the deceiver of the whole world which indicates, again, his intelligence, his cunning, his craftiness, and so on that he should be deceiving the entire world.

So demons, like angels, are personal, intelligent beings.

Secondly, as I've already indicated, demons are also spiritual beings. They are spirits just as angels are spirits. And so demons are spirits as well. This is stated in Matthew 8:16: "That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast

out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick.” Notice the synonymy of the terms “demons” and “spirits” in this passage. The people that were brought to Jesus were possessed by demons, and Jesus cast out the spirits. So these beings are spirits in the same way that angels are.

Look at Luke 10:17-20 – a passage that we've already read.

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” And he [Jesus] said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Here again we see the synonymy between the words “demons” and “spirits.” The demons which were cast out by the seventy as they went on their preaching mission are the same as the spirits that were subject to them through the authority of Christ. So the demons are associated with spirits.

Finally, Revelation 16:14a. It says, “for they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world.” Here the demons are explicitly referred to as demonic spirits. This is what they are.

So there are, on the one hand, angelic spirits, and then there are, on the other hand, demonic spirits. Both of them have the same fundamental nature; namely, they are minds without bodies – they are unembodied spiritual beings.

The next point is that these demonic beings are, of course, malevolent. They are malevolent in their character. This hardly needs to be said, but let's read a couple of scriptural passages in support of this point anyway.

In Matthew 12:43-45 Jesus says,

“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. So shall it be also with this evil generation.”

Notice that Jesus refers to these indwelling spirits as evil and unclean spirits who oppress and possess and destroy, in effect, the life of this man. They are evil and unclean spirits.

This is also indicated in Mark 1:27: “And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands

even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” Here these demonic creatures are referred to explicitly as unclean spirits.

Mark 3:11 is a similar reference: “And whenever the unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’”

Acts 8:7 provides further substantiation: “For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.” Again you see the same terminology is used in this passage – unclean spirits.

1 John 3:8 says, “He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.” This verse indicates the inherent sinfulness of Satan – that his character has from the beginning been sinful.

Two more passages are relevant. John 17:15. Jesus says, “I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one.” The word here translated “evil one” in my translation could just as well be translated “evil” – keep them from evil. But if it is the evil one that is being referred to then it is talking about Satan. This may be the way the Lord's Prayer is also to be understood. In Matthew 6:13, in my translation, it says, “Lead not into temptation but deliver us from evil,” but it could equally be translated “deliver us from the evil one.” That is to say, from Satan – deliver us from him. That, again, would indicate the nature of Satan as well as his minions; namely, they are evil, they are unclean, they are malevolent, and they seek to destroy God's work.

Next, they also (like angels, once again) form supernatural dominions and levels of authority. We see this, for example, in Ephesians 6:12. There Paul says,

For we are not contending against flesh and blood [that is a Jewish idiom for mortal creatures, mortal human beings], but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

When you read a passage like that you realize what we, as Christians, are up against in our spiritual warfare. We're not just fighting against human beings or human obstacles in life but against a whole panoply of spiritual powers and dominions that are arrayed against God and against his church.

Also, in Jude 8-10, a passage which we've come back to again and again in our study, we have the story about Michael contending with Satan. Jude 8-10, the writer says,

Yet in like manner these men in their dreamings defile the flesh, reject authority, and revile the glorious ones. But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, “The Lord rebuke you.” But these men



revile whatever they do not understand, and by those things that they know by instinct as irrational animals do, they are destroyed.

Here the phrase that I want to draw your attention to is that these heretics reject authority and are not afraid of reviling these demonic authorities and powers even though Michael himself, who is much greater in power and strength than they are, doesn't presume to do such a thing. This would be an indication of the sort of authority structure that exists even among these demonic creatures.

2 Peter 2:10-11 says something very similar. Here Peter also speaks of

those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and wilful, they are not afraid to revile the glorious ones, whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a reviling judgment upon them before the Lord.

So these foolish human heretics who despise authority are not reluctant to revile what they don't understand and so speak out against the evil dominions that are arrayed against the world, whereas angels (who are greater in strength and power than these human beings) are much more circumspect and careful not to speak out directly against these demonic principalities and powers that are over them. This would indicate the sort of ranks of authority that exist within this demonic realm, like the angelic realm.

Finally, 1 John 5:19 says, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one." This indicates, I think, Satan's authority over this planet. The whole world lies within the authority, within the power, of Satan. This is his sphere of authority.

So there is a supernatural realm, dominions, powers, principalities, rulers, authorities that are arrayed against God and against his church and which seek to undo God's work.

The next point is that these demonic creatures can possess people and exhibit supernatural strength. Mark 5:1-4 is the story of the Gadarene demoniac. Mark relates,

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had come out of the boat, there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who lived among the tombs; and no one could bind him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been bound with fetters and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.

Here we see how this demoniac possessed superhuman strength as a result of his being possessed by a demon.

Another example of this exhibition of superhuman strength would be the story in Acts 19:13-16. Here Luke says,

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

This is just one more illustration of the kind of superhuman strength that can come as a result of demonic possession.

The next point is that these demons must submit to the authority of Jesus' name. Mark 5:7-13, which is the sequel to the story of the Gadarene demoniac, relates the following:

and crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." And he begged him eagerly not to send them out of the country. Now a great herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him, "Send us to the swine, let us enter them." So he gave them leave. And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

In this encounter between Jesus and the demoniac you see the practice of naming someone as an attempt to control him. If you know a person's name then you're in a position of authority, and so the demon identifies Jesus: *Jesus, Son of God. I adjure you, don't torment me.* He was trying to exercise a sort of one-upsmanship on Jesus. Why? Because Jesus had already said to the man, *Come out of him.* Then Jesus turns the tables and says, *What is your name?* Now Jesus gets the demonic host to give him their name, and the demon says, *Legion; for we are many.* He was possessed by a multitude of demonic spirits. Then Jesus casts them out. Here we see the authority of Jesus' name over the demons and his authority to cast them out.

Also look at Luke 10:17 for another example. This is again the mission of the seventy healing and casting out demons and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Luke 10:17 says, "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!'" The phrase we want to highlight there is "in your name." It was in the name of Jesus that they had the power to cast out evil spirits.

This doesn't mean that there's something magical about the name of Jesus. After all, the name Jesus is different in different languages, right? Jesus is the English version of his name, and it's not as though the name of Jesus is a kind of magic formula or incantation that just anybody could utter to cast out demons. I think that's the lesson of Acts 19:13-16 that we read. Remember in that passage the Jewish exorcists did not believe in Jesus but they tried to use the name of Jesus as a sort of formula or incantation by which they could exorcise demonic beings: *I adjure you by the Jesus that Paul preaches to come out!* And the demon just mocks them and overpowers them and beats them up. Why? Because they didn't really have the authority of Jesus' name. When we talk about the power of Jesus' name, whether it's praying in Jesus' name or casting out demons in Jesus' name, it doesn't mean just the verbalization of some sort of a formula or an incantation. Rather, it means doing the thing with the authority of Jesus, and these Jewish exorcists just didn't have that kind of authority. For them the name of Jesus was just an empty formula that they would utter. But of course when Jesus and the disciples exorcised demonic spirits they did it in the authority of Christ and with his power in order to rule over the demonic realm.

Finally, these demonic creatures know their own end. Look at Matthew 8:29. Here the demoniacs say to Jesus, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" The phrase we want to highlight here is "to torment us before the time." What time are they talking about here? Well, they are talking about that time when on the Judgment Day they will be judged and eternally cast into hell. We see this in Matthew 25:41 where Jesus says, "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" This is their fate. The eternal fire has been reserved for the devil and his angels. This is, I think, especially interesting when you reflect on the fact that this eternal fire isn't prepared for human beings. This fate – this place – is prepared for the devil and his angels. It is a travesty in one sense that any human being should ever end up there. It wasn't designed for them. It was designed for the punishment of the devil and his angels. The only reason that some people wind up in hell is because they knowingly and consciously reject God's grace and the convicting power of his Holy Spirit and God's every effort to save them. They separate themselves irrevocably from God and his pardon and so condemn themselves to perdition. The Scripture says that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should reach redemption. God wants all persons to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. So this eternal fire is not intended for human beings and wasn't prepared for them. No human beings should be there. It is intended for the devil and his angels and their punishment, not for human beings. The devil and his minions know ultimately that they will be consigned here at the end of the age.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Is immortality one of the characteristics of demons, as in immortal like we are immortal – we will die, but our spirit or soul will forever exist somewhere? In other words, when a demon is defeated in spiritual battle, they are defeated but they are not destroyed. They are only sent to a different location.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that's right, and that's indicated by this passage – “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” They're not annihilated. They don't have immortality in the sense of eternal life, but they do have eternal existence and will not be annihilated but rather punished forever.

*Student:* Is the only difference really between angels and demons their moral alignment?

*Dr. Craig:* I think so. That seems right to me. It seems to me that demons were plausibly originally angelic beings and therefore have the same essential properties. But their character has been distorted and perverted so that they are now incredibly evil in their moral character. But other than that, it seems to me that we're talking about the same sort of creature here. This is important because in cartoons and popular culture the devil and demons are often portrayed as comic book characters with horns and a long tail with a point on the end and sort of a buffoon that you can easily deal with. But when you read what Paul is talking about – these principalities and powers and authorities that control the world – it makes you realize we're not up against something so silly as that. This is an incredibly evil and powerful being who is going to destroy you if you let him. I think that underlines the importance of trying to live a sinless life before God, to try to live a life that is guided and filled by the Holy Spirit so as to deviate neither to the right nor to the left. Because when you stray off the path and sin gets into your life, you open yourself up to the power of these demonic beings. It's only as we are in Christ and walk in the fullness of the Spirit that we will be protected from this. So the next time you're tempted to sin, just think of what you're doing and that can help to strengthen you and your resolve to resist temptation.

*Student:* My question is on the whole concept of this dominion of evil or whatever where you say there is this hierarchy and all that. I'm not sure about that. I'm kind of more along the lines of what C. S. Lewis said when he said hell is more like a confederacy. So you have evil and you might have some organization there, but I'm not sure you have organization like you would with like a military or country or something like that. I see it as more of a decentralized organization.

*Dr. Craig:* I'm not familiar with Lewis' theology that much, but he did in his *Screwtape Letters* have the idea of a senior demon writing to a junior demon giving him advice. It's ironic and not meant to be literal, but it seemed there that Lewis was expressing the notion that there are different levels of power and authority. And the passages that I read from Jude and 2 Peter that talk about despising authority and how foolish this is and that

even Michael wouldn't do that, that suggests powerfully to me that there is some kind of authority structure here.

*Student:* Just a quick follow on to that. As far as the authorities are concerned though, even when you see in Revelation in, I think it's chapter 17 or 16, where you see evil eventually turns on itself. Evil is evil, so how can evil trust evil? How does evil respect the authority of something else that is evil? Do you see what I'm saying?

*Dr. Craig:* I do. Maybe hell in that sense is a chaos of rebellious creatures. That certainly would be plausible.

*Student:* What I'm saying – you've got Satan who's jealous of God, but who's to say that there's not a demon that's jealous that Satan is in charge? So that's what I'm saying.

*Dr. Craig:* I understand it. That's a good point. Maybe, though, in this life, it's in their own best self-interests to submit lest they be annihilated – well, not annihilated literally – but lest they be in some way reprimanded and crushed.

*Student:* Correct. And in *Screwtape Letters*, that's what happens. The senior demon actually ends up killing or destroying or whatever the junior demon because he fails to perform.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. Well, that brings us to the end of our time.

**END DISCUSSION**<sup>69</sup>

## Lecture 24: The Work of Demons

Today we want to wrap up our discussion of angels and demons by looking at the work of demons. Let's say a word about the present activity or work of demons in the world.

First of all, these demonic creatures blind unbelievers to the truth of the Gospel. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul writes:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God

That's a sobering thought, isn't it? When you encounter an unbeliever who resists the Gospel and is not willing to place his faith in Christ, Paul says that Satan has blinded his mind to keep him from seeing the truth of Christ's Gospel. So Satan is responsible for keeping people in unbelief and making them resistant to the message of the Gospel.

In 2 Timothy 2:24-26, speaking of the character which we are to develop as servants of Christ, Paul says,

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Notice that according to this verse unbelievers are already in the snare of Satan. They have already been captured by him to do his will. He prevents them from believing the Gospel and from knowing the truth. Moreover, their wills are captive to him to carry out his will. So unbelievers are both intellectually and volitionally impaired. The prayer is that, as we show forth a gracious character which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in evangelizing unbelievers, God may grant them repentance so that they can escape Satan's snare and come to believe the Gospel and so find eternal life.

Second, Satan and these demonic beings seek to nullify the preaching of the Kingdom. In Mark chapter 4 we have the familiar parable of the sower. Notice what Jesus says in verse 15 in interpreting this parable – “And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them.” Those who are along the path where the seed is sown represent unbelievers who hear the word of the Kingdom. That's what this parable is about. It's a parable of the Kingdom. But Satan comes and snatches away that word so that they cannot respond to it. Thus, Satan seeks to counteract the preaching of the Kingdom of God.

Third, Satan and the demons seek to destroy the servants of God. That is to say, these creatures not only keep unbelievers in their snare, but they are out to destroy you. They hate you intensely. They will do anything that they can within their power to destroy you. Paul had founded a church in Thessalonica and then went on to other cities on his Mediterranean missionary tour. In time he became worried about the fate of those believers that he had left behind at this infant church in Thessalonica. He wrote 1 Thessalonians to them. In 1 Thessalonians 3:5 Paul writes to his Christian converts, “For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent that I might know your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor would be in vain.” Here Paul’s fear was that Satan the tempter would have tempted the young Thessalonian Christians so that they would have apostatized and all of the apostle’s labor would have gone down the drain and been for nothing because they had lapsed in their faith and so had been destroyed by Satan.

Also 2 Corinthians 2:11. Paul says that his forgiving the people in Corinth for their terrible sin was “to keep Satan from gaining the advantage over us; for we are not ignorant of his designs.” Satan’s design was to destroy these Corinthian Christians – to gain the advantage over them, as Paul puts it. But Paul says he is not ignorant of that, and so he is careful to exercise the grace of Christian forgiveness in order to keep them in the faith.

Finally, 1 Timothy 3:6-7, speaking here of the qualifications for being a bishop in the church, Paul says, “He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil; moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” This is yet one more example of Satan seeking to undo Christians. He’s trying to ensnare them, to capture them and so to bring them into condemnation.

In 2 Corinthians 11:28, Paul speaks of the suffering that he endured as an apostle of Christ. It’s interesting that, in addition to all of the physical suffering he endured, he also says besides this there is “my anxiety for all the churches.” Why was Paul so anxious for the churches that he had founded? Well, simply because one of the activities of Satan and these demonic beings is to destroy God’s servants and to render them as ineffective as they possibly can.

Fourth, these demons can possess people. Remember the story we read of the Gadarene demoniac who was indwelt by a legion of these demonic creatures in Mark 5. What was significant about that exorcism is that it said that the demons *came out of* the man and they *entered into* the swine that were feeding in the area. This is an example of demonic possession where the demons actually indwell a person. Also, look at the example of Judas Iscariot in John 13:27. We don’t often think of Judas as being demon-possessed,



but when you read John 13:27 that seems to be what it indicates. During the Last Supper we read, “Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly.’” And Judas went out to betray Christ. So he was apparently demon-possessed at that point. He had given himself over to Satan, and Satan had entered into him.

Other exorcisms performed by Jesus in the gospels should be seen, I think, in this light. For example, in Mark 1:32 we read, “That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.” This would be an example of Jesus’ ministry as an exorcist in casting out demons. Luke 9:42 gives another example. This is the story of the epileptic boy that was healed by Jesus. Luke 9:42 says, “While he was coming, the demon tore him and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.” This would be another example of Jesus’ ability to exorcise these demons from people who were demon-possessed and thereby to show the inbreaking of God’s Kingdom in his ministry.

Fifth, Satan and his demons harass God’s servants. If they can’t destroy you, if they can’t possess you, then they will at least harass you. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 Paul says to the Thessalonians, “we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.” Paul wanted to come and visit the Thessalonians once again to see if they were holding to the faith, but Satan was throwing obstacles in Paul’s path preventing him from carrying out the mission that he desired to do.

Also, this kind of harassment can take the form of physical suffering or illness. In 2 Corinthians 12:7 Paul speaks of a bodily infirmity from which he suffered and he calls it “a messenger of Satan, sent to harass me.” Specifically here a bodily infirmity was seen as being a way in which Satan was harassing the apostle Paul. 1 Peter 5:8 advises, “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour.” Given this, we should expect difficulties, suffering, adversities, and so forth in this earthly life.

Finally, Satan accuses unbelievers. Revelation 12:10 says,

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

Here the reference is to Satan as the accuser of believers before God, until Satan is finally and decisively vanquished.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I'm curious what you think about exactly how does Satan tempt people? I think people have this idea that he can whisper things in my mind or cause me to think thoughts that come from without and not from within myself. Or does he alternatively put me in situations and arrange me to be in situations where he knows that I will be tempted? Or both of the above? I just don't have a good grasp of that.

*Dr. Craig:* As I read the New Testament, I think that we, as human beings, have a fallen human nature that is deeply sinful and corrupted. This is typically called "the flesh" in the New Testament. That's the word that Paul uses. Now, that shouldn't be thought of just our fleshly bodies. Paul is not saying that our material body is evil. But "the flesh" designates that aspect of human nature that is opposed to God, is sinful, is corrupt. It's twisted. It's bent in on itself rather than aligned toward God. I think that Satan uses the flesh. That's why typically the great enemies of Christians are thought to be the world, the flesh, and the devil. Those appear, for example, in that engraving by Albrecht Dürer where he has the devil along with the knight. So I would say that Satan can work through our flesh. When we indulge in the sins of the flesh we open ourselves to Satan's kingdom and influence and are defeated by him.

*Student:* How do you delineate between demon-possession and a person's just sinning? We talked about Judas.

*Dr. Craig:* I do think that it can be very difficult empirically to know when a person is actually demon-possessed or is mentally ill (schizophrenic say, something of that sort). But it does seem very clear that biblically-speaking demonic possession involves an indwelling spiritual being in your body, and therefore is vastly different from mere sinning – yielding to the desires of the flesh and of the temptations of the world. That is why I emphasized that, when Jesus exorcised these beings, it says they came out of the person and then, in the Gadarene demoniac case, they went into the swine and they perished. They were all killed. So it seems to me that this sort of demonic possession is much, much more serious and involves this kind of indwelling of another spiritual being in your body. And if I might say, I think this is why we as Christians need to avoid like the plague any kind of occult activity. We should not indulge, however innocent it may seem, in things like Ouija boards, tarot cards, seances, attempts to have divination, or contact the dead. These occult practices open us to this demonic spiritual realm, and those who get ensnared in it can be very, very seriously damaged.

*Student:* Two questions. Number one, with the Defenders Christmas luncheon coming up, because of your topic, are you discouraging people from bringing deviled eggs?

*Dr. Craig:* [laughter] Deviled eggs are fine! I love deviled eggs, and will give an angelic blessing on them!

*Student:* Here's a serious question. In the New Testament a frequent theme is that all powers . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Hey, I just thought – if Leanne wants to bring a devil's food cake, she could do that, too!

*Student:* There can be angel food cake to counterbalance it. But a serious question. A frequent theme in the New Testament is that everything – all powers, dominions, names, principalities, and so forth – will be subjected to Christ or put under his feet. There are two verses – Ephesians 1 and 1 Peter 3 – where it says that's already happened. But then there are other passages, like 1 Corinthians 15 it seems to me and Philippians 3:21 and Hebrews 2:8, which say that this is to be future. On Hebrews 2:8, it says we do not yet see all things subjected to Christ. If you look at that passage on the surface, it sounds like it's talking about man – we do not yet see all things subjected to man. But I heard a lecture by Leon Morris, the New Testament scholar, and he said that that refers to Christ. He elaborated and said the reason why we have intractable problems in terms of poverty and hunger and disease and warfare and so forth is because we do not yet see all things subjected to Christ. So my question is: how do you reconcile these two different sets of passages? Has it happened or will it happen?

*Dr. Craig:* I think that there is, very common in the New Testament, a sort of “already, but not yet” tension. This appears over and over again. The Kingdom of God has already come in Jesus and in his preaching and ministry. And at the cross there is a decisive triumph over Satan. But the Kingdom of God has not fully come in all of its victory when the final subjugation of Satan and these demonic beings will take place and they will be cast into eternal hell. That clearly hasn't taken place yet. So there is a kind of “already, but not yet” tension in the New Testament which says that the decisive acts have been done to achieve the victory (namely, the cross and the resurrection of Christ) at which Satan was defeated and our pardon and salvation was achieved, but that these will only be fully realized with the second coming of Christ and his fully establishing his reign and then giving it over to the Father, as it says in 1 Corinthians 15.

*Student:* Is it possible for a truly regenerate believer to be indwelt by a demon – to be possessed by a demon? The way I've answered that is that it appears to me obvious that if a believer has received the Holy Spirit into them that a demon should not be able to overcome the Holy Spirit within you. Obviously, God is stronger than a demon, so how could a demon possess a regenerate believer? But I'm just wondering what you think about that.

*Dr. Craig:* It is a very difficult question which the New Testament doesn't directly address. On the one hand, theologically, there is the point that you make. Someone who is indwelt with the Holy Spirit and is regenerate, it would seem impossible for that person

to also be indwelt and possessed by a demon. And yet, empirically-speaking, those who are involved in occult ministries – trying to free people from the bondage to the occult – will tell you over and over again they know of cases wherein Christians have been possessed by demons and have been exorcised and then finally freed from this influence. How do you put that together? I think it's possible to make a distinction between being *possessed* by a demon and being *oppressed* by a demon. It could be that these Christians, though not possessed by a demon, because of their dabbling in occult practices or sin are nevertheless under heavy demonic oppression and so need to be freed from that. The other possible answer could be that even though a Christian can be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, he may not be filled with the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, he may be living under the power of the flesh, as the Christians in Corinth were. Perhaps for a Christian who is living under the power and the influence of the flesh, the indwelling Holy Spirit doesn't have as much influence. Maybe a person like that could also be indwelt by a demonic being who operates in that person through the flesh and which needs to be exorcised. Either one of those is a possibility, I think, and we don't really know the answer to the question. But empirically, at least, we do know that it is possible for Christians to be very oppressed and bound up in these kinds of demonic occult activities. Therefore, as I say, we ourselves who are not need to avoid these kinds of activities.

*Student:* We've said before that the only difference between angels and demons is the moral alignment. So my question (which is a little bit tangential) is: can angels, and do angels, possess people?

*Dr. Craig:* I've never thought of that question! But it would seem to follow from what I've said that an angelic spirit could possess someone. Maybe that's not the sort of thing that angels do. I don't think we have any example of it in the Bible. The purpose of these demons indwelling people is to take them over and to do them harm, to undo them. That's not something that an angel would do even to bring about good. It would be pointless for an angel to indwell a person so as to do good deeds and will good things because that's the very opposite of moral virtue and moral agency. Do you see what I mean? It's turning him into a puppet where now his moral choices become meaningless and insignificant. So while it might be possible, perhaps it's just pointless. Interesting question.

*Student:* I think that it is possible for a believer to be possessed because if you go back and look at the demoniac in Mark 5, he says, *What business do we have with each other Jesus, Son of the Most High God?* Would a demon praise Jesus Christ as the Most High, Son of God? I don't think so.

*Dr. Craig:* He wouldn't praise him, but I did address that question in my lesson. What I said is that this is an example of, in the ancient world, exercising authority over the other person by knowing his name and by naming him. The person who can name the other one

is in a kind of superior position. That's why Jesus then turns the table and says to the demoniac, *What is your name?* I think that's what the demon is doing here.

*Student:* I wanted to follow up on that also because you see people like that – like Bob Larson. They like to pretend to, *Oh, I have authority over this demon* and *Tell me your name* and that kind of garbage. I don't know that that's really truly effective though. That sounds almost more superstitious. I don't see a lot of biblical authority for that. When you have the power to name something, you have authority in one sense but . . . I know your name so if I say your name that doesn't mean necessarily that I have authority over you.

*Dr. Craig:* You are thinking like a modern in saying that. I don't know how to respond to that because I've never been involved in an exorcism personally. I've read accounts of them, and I know there are techniques that are used. Perhaps asking for the name is in some cases helpful or justified. It would be probably based on this Mark 5 passage. But when I think of, for example, Paul's exorcising the demon from that girl who was following them about saying, *These are men of the Most High God*, he didn't ask her name. He just said, *Come out of her, you unclean spirit!* I don't know that we have in other cases this use of naming, so one mustn't think of these things as sort of mechanical recipes to follow.

*Student:* The distinction between oppression and possession – when I hear those two and what goes on behind them, is there really much of a difference between them? Because it seems almost even with the oppression the same things are happening to someone that is also possessed.

*Dr. Craig:* It is just an attempt to deal with the theological problem that was raised: how can a person indwelt by the Holy Spirit and regenerate be indwelt by a demonic spirit at the same time? It would attempt to answer that theological question by saying this demonic presence is outside the person and is attacking him from the outside. It is not something that is indwelling him in the way that a demon-possessed person is.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let me wrap up by saying a few words about the Christian response to demons. How should we respond to the devil? Should we worry about him? Should we be afraid? What should we do? Three points briefly suggest themselves from Scripture.

1. We should submit to God and resist the devil. James 4:7 says, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Notice you must first submit yourself to God. You cannot resist demons in your own strength. You need the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. You need, first, to submit yourself to God, and then be resistant. The prime example of this, of course, would be Jesus himself in his temptations by Satan where again and again he resisted Satan's temptation by bringing

and opposing to it the truth of God's word in taking a stand on what God's word said and submitting to that.

2. We should watch and pray. Jesus says in Matthew 26:41, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Because our flesh is weak and because Satan can get at us through the flesh (which, as I say, means that fallen principle within the human nature that is sinful, corrupt, and perverted), we need to be on high alert and constantly praying as we go through the day so that we don't succumb to our weaknesses and fall.

3. We need to clothe ourselves with the full armor of God. In Ephesians 6:11-18 Paul writes,

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

I think that the overriding point that Paul is making here is that you need to be prepared for spiritual warfare by being involved in spiritual disciplines like prayer, studying the Word of God, developing righteous virtues in your life, and so on and so forth. Dallas Willard has rightly remarked that it's not enough simply to ask yourself in some situation, "What would Jesus do?" because unless we have already developed the character of Jesus we won't be able to do what Jesus would do in that situation. The battle with Satan thus begins long before an encounter actually takes place. It begins with daily walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, praying, reading the Bible, engaging in meaningful worship, sharing the Gospel, and exercising our spiritual gifts in the context of a local community of fellow believers. We need to prepare for battle, to be clothed with the armor of God, so that when we are in a situation of testing we have the ability to do what Jesus would do. Apart from these preparations we will be weak and easily vanquished.

Those are some of the scriptural admonitions about how we can be prepared for spiritual warfare.

With that we come to the end of our discussion of the theological locus of the doctrine of creation on which we've been embarked for the last many months. Next time we'll be moving on to a new theme and topic.<sup>70</sup>