

Questioning Christianity

“How can I believe in miracles in an age of science?”

John 20:24-31

~ Delivered at DHBC on November 16, 2014

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to John 20.
- We are doing a series entitled *Questioning Christianity* in which we are looking at seven of the most common questions people have about the Christian faith. This morning we are asking, ***“How can we believe in miracles in an age of science?”***
 - It is a very important question because Christianity rises or falls on certain miraculous events actually happening in history. The greatest of these is the resurrection of Jesus. In I Corinthians 15:17 the apostle Paul writes, ***“if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”***
 - In other words, the historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection is so foundational to Christianity that if you could in some way prove that he did not rise from the dead, you would destroy Christianity forever.
- But this is precisely the point. When some people look at Christianity they say, ***“how can anyone living in the 21st century with even a high school level of education believe that a virgin conceived a child, a man can walk on water, or a corpse rose from the dead? Ancient people may have believed such things but with our scientific knowledge, we know better.”***
 - There is no question that the scientific advances of even the last one hundred years are nothing short of astounding. We have eradicated small pox and developed antibiotics, replaced the horse with the car, the typewriter with the computer, and the radio with the Internet. We have walked on the moon, split the atom, and found a way to get the caramel into the Caramilk bar.
 - In light of all this how can we still believe in miracles? Richard Dawkins writes, ***“any belief in miracles is flatly contradictory not just to the facts of science but also to the spirit of science.”***¹
- This morning I want to examine three areas of bias that keep people from believing in miracles and thus keep people from believing in Christianity. I want us to consider these three biases and ask whether they are reasonable to believe.
 - First, I will ask us to consider our bias against the supernatural, second, our bias against ancient people, and third, our bias against God himself.

CONSIDER OUR BIAS AGAINST THE SUPERNATURAL

- I want to begin by asking us to **(SHOW SLIDE)** consider our bias against the supernatural.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 150; Richard Dawkins, “Is Science a Religion?” speech to the American Humanist Association, 1996; “God vs. Science,” *Time*, November 13, 2006.

- I want to show that this bias is at the very root of why people say miracles are impossible. The question of miracles is not a question of science versus faith, it is a question of naturalism versus supernaturalism and which one you hold to.
 - Let me explain each of these with a picture.
- Let's begin with naturalism. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Here we see a closed box. Inside the box is everything that exists in the natural order that we call the universe. Notice there is nothing outside the box. There is no God. There is no supernatural realm. Carl Sagan sums up naturalism with his trademark slogan, *"The universe is all there is or ever was or ever will be."*
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** So naturalism is the belief that the natural universe is the sum total of reality.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Miracles are impossible then because 1) there is nothing outside the universe that can have an effect within the universe 2) everything that happens in the universe can be explained in terms of natural causes.²
- You can see then that there is not much point in trying to prove miracles to a naturalist because the naturalist has already decided they are impossible.
 - Even if such a person is confronted with a supposed miracle they will explain it away by saying, *"my senses must have deceived me"* or *"I don't have an explanation but I assume there is an explanation that does not involve the miraculous."*
- Let's talk now about supernaturalism. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Here again we see a box that contains the whole natural order that is the universe. But notice that something exists inside and outside the box, namely God. In Christian teaching, God created the box and everything in it.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Supernaturalism then is the belief that there is a supernatural reality (God) that exists within and beyond the natural universe.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Miracles are therefore possible because God is free to act within his universe.
- To bring this all-together then we see that **(SHOW SLIDE)** the debate about miracles is not actually the debate about miracles at all; it is actually the debate about the existence of God. If God exists then it is perfectly plausible and possible for God to act within his universe. If God can create the entire universe then it is perfectly reasonable to believe that he can turn water into wine or make a blind man see.
 - If you say miracles are impossible then you must realize that you are actually making the claim that God does not exist. If you want **(SHOW SLIDE)** to deny the existence of miracles then you must have an airtight case against the existence of God because if God exists then miracles are perfectly possible and plausible.
 - So in this first point I am simply asking you to consider your bias against the supernatural. To say that you won't believe in

² Ronald Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 38.

Christianity because you already know miracles don't happen is to beg the question. To say miracles are impossible you have to prove God does not exist.

- So consider your anti-supernatural bias.

CONSIDER YOUR BIAS AGAINST ANCIENT PEOPLE

- Now let's turn to consider a second major bias that keeps people from believing in miracles. In the second place let's **(SHOW SLIDE)** consider our bias against ancient people.
 - It is common to hear people say, *"Yes, I am sure that Christianity was once plausible but times have changed. When ancient people heard miracle stories, like Jesus rising from the dead, they were inclined to believe them because such stories resonated with their uneducated and superstitious worldviews. We know better in the modern world."*
- But this is simply not true. Ancient people were not so gullible as to believe in just any old miracle story.
 - Joseph knew where babies came from. He did not believe Mary when she said she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He decided to quietly call off their engagement. Only a visit from an angel changed his mind.
 - The Bible is filled with miracle doubters.
- In regard to the resurrection of Jesus, ancient people found such a claim just as inconceivable as you and I do, if not more so.
 - In the Greco Roman worldview people believed many things about life after death but they were unanimous in believing that dead people do not come back to life in their bodies.
 - Moreover, resurrection was totally undesirable because they believed the body was corrupt and defiled. To die meant that your soul was finally released from the prison house of the body and once released no one would want it back.
 - Jews could not accept the claim of Jesus' resurrection but for different reasons. Jews believed God would raise the dead all together but that he would do it on that final day when he comes to abolish all diseases, suffering, death and injustice. So if you told a Jew that Jesus rose from the dead they would say, *"Are you crazy? Have death and disease ended? No. Well then, your claim is false."*
- When the ancient Christians claimed Jesus rose from the dead they were doing it with people, who far from being inclined to believe such things actually believed it was impossible, undesirable, and absurd.
 - When Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus in Athens, the intellectual centre of the ancient world, we read that *"some mocked"* (Acts 17:32).
 - My point is simply this: **(SHOW SLIDE)** It is inaccurate to say ancient people were more predisposed to believe miracle stories than we are today. Like today, the ancient world had people who were gullible, ignorant, and superstitious but, like today, there were also critically minded people who were highly skeptical of miraculous claims. Despite this skepticism, many came to believe.

THE PROTOTYPICAL ANCIENT SKEPTIC

- To further show that our bias against ancient people is misguided, I want look at the story of the prototypical ancient skeptic. We still use his name today to describe doubt. I want to look at the story of “doubting Thomas” in John 20.
 - John records this story of Thomas for all those who refuse to make a blind leap of faith, who demand rock solid evidence for belief, and who want a rational faith.
 - John is unapologetic in saying that he gives this story that we too may believe in Jesus. To this end, John invites us to consider two things about doubting Thomas’ story.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, John challenges us to believe Jesus rose from the dead on the basis of what type of person Thomas was.
 - **READ 24-25** – *Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”*
 - When the other disciples claim that Jesus rose from the dead, Thomas simply cannot believe it. How gullible do you have to be? There has to be some rational explanation. I love Thomas. He is the kind of person who refuses to be taken in by some scam, some trick, con, or wishful thinking.

PETER POPOFF AND RELIGIOUS GULLIBILITY

- We know exactly why he thinks this way because we have seen how easily people get taken in, especially by religious swindlers.
 - Does the name Peter Popoff mean anything to you? Popoff had a huge healing ministry in the 1980’s that brought in millions of dollars.
- At his meetings Popoff would call out to the audience, **“God is giving me a name. Josephine Parino. You have cancer of the stomach. Come down and be healed.”** Sure enough Josephine did have cancer. Many times he would even call out a name with an exact street address. It all seemed very amazing.
 - When world famous magician James Randi and his assistant Steve Shaw came they noticed that Popoff was wearing a hearing aid. They also noticed that Mrs. Popoff was always at the door having people fill in prayer cards and asking them, **“Is Jesus going to heal you? And what’s your name, and where do you live? Have you had this condition long?”**
- Randi brought in a radio scanner and at 39.17 MHz he heard the voice of God speaking to Popoff...only God sounded like a woman. It was Popoff’s wife. When he heard her say, **“Honey, I’m looking up names now”**³, he knew he was onto something.
 - They filmed an entire evening. The next night he went on the Johnny Carson show and played it twice on TV. They played it first just as you would see it from the audience and then a second time with Mrs. Popoff’s

³ <http://www.bible.ca/tongues-popoff-39-17Mhz.htm>

voice instructing her husband of names, addresses, ailments, and the locations of people.

- Here is the sad thing: I still see him on late night TV again calling people to give to his ministry.

THOMAS' SPECIFIC REQUEST

- This kind of twisted thing reveals that people are gullible when it comes to miracles and, in the name of religion, that gullibility can be manipulated. But Thomas was the skeptic who refused to be taken in, swindled, or deceived. Notice the specific evidence that he asks for that could not be faked.
 - First, he must see Jesus himself so he can discern if it is really him.
 - Second, he must see the nail marks in his hands and touch him. This ensures Jesus is not a ghost but it also narrows who the person could be. You see not all crucifixion victims were nailed to a cross. Many were tied with ropes.
 - So it has to be Jesus himself and he has to have nails prints in his hands.
 - But finally, he asks for something that was unique to Jesus. What is that? That he was speared. Why is that significant? The Romans did not normally spear people in the side. If they wanted them to die they would simply come along and break their legs. The victim's lungs would collapse and they would suffocate in minutes. But remember that when they got to Jesus he was already dead. Just to make sure, a soldier took a spear and pierced his side.
 - Do you see it? Thomas wants incontrovertible concrete evidence that the Jesus who appeared to the disciples is the same Jesus who died on the cross and not a ghost or some look alike trying to defraud everyone. If he does not get it, he will not believe.

THE SKEPTIC TURNED BELIEVER

- So first John invites us consider this ancient man named Thomas and the skeptical man that he was. Second, John challenges us to **(SHOW SLIDE)** believe on the basis of the transformation that happened to doubting Thomas.
 - ***READ 26-27 – Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”***
- Notice the exact parallel between Thomas' original demands and what Jesus now commands Thomas to do.

- Thomas said, *“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails.”* Jesus says, *“Put your finger here, and see my hands.”*
- Thomas said, *“Unless I...place my hand into his side”* Jesus says, *“put out your hand, and place it in my side.”*
- Thomas said, *“I will never believe it.”* Jesus says, *“Do not disbelieve, but believe.”*
- Now notice the complete transformation in Thomas. The skeptic is instantly a believer. His response says everything. **READ 28** – *“Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”* Now it would be astounding for anyone to call another man “God” but for a Jew to worship a man as God is simply shocking because if it is not true then it is the height of blasphemy.
 - Yet Thomas is clearly professing that Jesus is his Lord and His God. He is worshipping Him.
 - But this response is a bit strange. Why not say, *“You’re alive!”* or at least *“Sorry about that Jesus.”* Why respond with *“my Lord and my God?”*
- Remember, verse 26 says that this event took place a week after Jesus first appeared to the disciples. Thomas had to go a whole week hearing his best friends saying, *“Thomas we have seen the Lord.”* Now what do you suppose he did that week? D.A. Carson, whom I have borrowed some points from on this passage, suggests that in his distressed state Thomas would have thought over and over again, *“What if it is true?”* Perhaps his mind reviewed the past three years with Jesus.
 - Perhaps he recalled that day when Jesus said to a paralyzed man, *“Son, your sins are forgiven!”* Do you remember how the teachers of the law responded to that statement? *“Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! For who can forgive sins but God alone?”* They were right.
 - Carson says to imagine you were mugged so badly that you were hospitalized. Imagine that I then went and found the perpetrators and said to them, *“Your sins are forgiven.”* What would you say to me? *“How dare you. You cannot forgive them. Only I can as the one who was offended against.”*
 - In the same way scripture says that all sin is ultimately against God and therefore only God can ultimately forgive sins. Yet here is Jesus telling a man his sins are forgiven.
 - Perhaps Thomas then recalls the time Jesus spoke and the weather obeyed him, or the time he walked into a funeral and caused a dead man to sit up in his coffin, or the time the 5 loaves and 2 fish multiplied to feed 5000 people.
- Thomas had thought about all these things. And now with incontrovertible evidence standing right in front of him, all the miracles flooded across his mind. Looking into the eyes of Jesus, Thomas sees past the human shell. His mind explodes with the realization of who this is that stands before him.

- This is no mere man. This is not just a great teacher. This is not even the greatest of all men. This man is otherworldly. This man is beyond the natural. This man is super natural. Thomas knows in that moment He is in the presence of deity and in complete surrender and faith he worships Jesus saying, **“My Lord and My God.”**
 - So you see we must get rid of this bias against ancient people that says they were inclined to believe in miracles. Thomas was a skeptic but he became a believer on the basis of the evidence.

CONSIDER OUR BIAS AGAINST GOD

- As we continue Thomas’ story we want to turn now to our third bias against miracles. In the final place let’s **(SHOW SLIDE)** consider our bias against God himself.
 - It is right here, when Thomas confesses that Jesus is God, that the whole issue of miracles becomes so terrifying for us. You see if miracles are true, if Thomas is right, then it means we are not alone in the universe.
 - To suddenly realize, like Thomas claims he did, that God himself has been among us is quite shocking.
- C.S. Lewis compares this to the shock you feel in smaller matters – the shock that occurs when suddenly the fishing rod pulls back at you, the shock when something breathes beside you in the dark, the shock of hearing a twig break when you thought you were all alone in the forest, the shock of thinking you were just playing cops and robbers only to hear your sister say, **“Be quiet! I think I just heard real footsteps in the hallway.”**
 - It is always shocking to realize that you are not alone – to realize that something has invaded your space. To come face to face with a true miracle is to suddenly realize that God himself is real – that he is pulling at the other end of the line, that he is hunting us in the forest, that he is in our hallway and has been there all along.⁴
 - This is terrifying to us for it means we are not alone.
- And if we are not alone, if God himself invades our space, then we must come to grips with who God is and anything he might require of us. God may tell us how to live our lives, how to spend our money, how to relate to him, and how we can and cannot use our sexuality.
 - So I ask, **(SHOW SLIDE)** could it be that our bias against miracles is actually a bias against God himself? If miracles occur it means God exists and if God exists we must reevaluate everything in light of who he is and what he requires.
 - When people are really honest they admit this bias against God.
- The philosopher Thomas Nagel of NYU candidly writes, **“I want atheism to be true...It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God...I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”**⁵

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 124-125.

⁵ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 130.

- C.S. Lewis admitted the same bias before he became a Christian. He said, ***“I had always wanted, above all things, not to be ‘interfered with.’”***⁶
- So I am asking us to consider the idea that underneath all our difficulties with miracles there may simply be a bias against God. We don’t want God to exist because he might contradict us, he might not have our best interests in mind, and he might ruin our fun in life.
 - It is right here that we come back to Thomas’ story for here we find that the God who has invaded human history wants nothing but our good.
- John says that he records this story for a reason. Look at verses 30-31. **READ 30-31** – ***Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.***
 - So you see the claim of Christianity is that the reason God invaded our space and walked among us is to bring us life. How can we think he is against us when God in human flesh voluntarily died for us? If God was against us, why would he give his life for us?
 - Oh yes, God may contradict you but it is like when I contradict my children. They think I am out to ruin them but when I contradict them it is only because I truly want them to experience the fullness of life and I know better than they do what leads to this.
- The message of Christianity is that God wants to give you life, both now and for all eternity. The way to get that life is to turn your life over to Jesus.
 - Notice that Thomas does not just affirm the fact of Jesus resurrection saying, ***“I admit you rose from the dead.”*** He does not even simply affirm that Jesus is God by saying, ***“you are Lord, you are God.”*** He takes all of these facts and turns them into a personal profession of faith and worship. He says, ***“My Lord and my God.”***
 - To find the life that God offers we must go beyond affirming the existence of miracles. We must come to a personal profession of faith for it is ***“by believing you may have life in his name.”***
- And then look back at verse 29. **READ 29** - ***Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*** Jesus is looking ahead to the day when people like you and I will not be given the tangible evidence that Thomas and the other disciples were given.
 - But based on their testimony people will believe. Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who after reading Thomas’ story believe in Thomas’ God even though they do not have Thomas’ experience.
 - Consider your biases. Are they really reasonable? Christianity teaches that Jesus died to rescue you from your sins, that he rose from the dead, that He is your God whom you will one day stand before. Will you bow the knee to him? Will you give him your life?

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1955), 228.