

Unbelievable?

Easter for skeptics, doubters, scientists, and those who won't be taken in by scams, conspiracy theories, or blind faith

John 20:24-31

Delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic via Livestream
at Central Baptist Church on April 4, 2021

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** What a wonderful service so far! Thanks to all the musicians and everyone who has made this happen. I particularly want to welcome you if you've joined us because you have questions about Christianity or just find this whole idea of Jesus rising from the dead to be unbelievable.
 - We need to say right up front that Christianity rises or falls on certain miraculous events actually happening in history. The greatest of these is the resurrection of Jesus. Even the apostle Paul wrote that, **(SHOW SLIDE 2) "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."**
 - In other words, the miracle of Jesus' resurrection is so foundational to Christianity that if it did not happen then all of Christianity is false.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 3)** But it is right here that so many people have troubles with Christianity. How can anyone living in the 21st century with even a high school level of education believe in a miracle that says a dead man rose from the dead? Ancient people may have believed such things but with our scientific knowledge, we know better.
 - Today's most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, once said, **(SHOW SLIDE 4) "any belief in miracles is flatly contradictory not just to the facts of science but also to the spirit of science."**¹
 - In other words, many people find the resurrection of Jesus to simply be unbelievable.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 5)** So if you are a skeptic, a doubter, a scientist, or are just someone who refuses to be taken in by scams, conspiracy theories, or blind faith then I want to invite you on a journey with me.
 - I want us to consider three biases that we modern people have; biases that keep us from believing in miracles, and thus keep us from believing in Jesus and his resurrection.
 - I want us to think about these biases and ask whether they are correct.

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.

CONSIDER OUR BIAS AGAINST THE SUPERNATURAL

- First then, I want to begin by asking us to **(SHOW SLIDE 6) consider our bias against the supernatural.**
 - 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 what I mean with a picture.
- Let's begin with naturalism. **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Here we see a closed box. Inside the box is everything that exists in the natural world 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, **(SHOW SLIDE 8) "The universe is all there is or ever was or ever will be."**
 - So, **(SHOW SLIDE 9) naturalism is the belief that the natural universe is the sum total of reality.**
 - You can see then why a naturalist, like Richard Dawkins, does not believe in miracles. **(SHOW SLIDE 10) Miracles are impossible 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."*** So miracles are simply impossible.
- Let's talk now about supernaturalism. **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** 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 12) Supernaturalism is the belief that there is a supernatural reality (God) that exists within and beyond the natural universe.**
 - How does this effect one's views of miracles? **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Miracles are possible because God is free to act within his universe.**
- To bring this all-together then we see that **(SHOW SLIDE 14) the debate about miracles is not actually the debate about miracles at all; it is actually the debate about the existence of God.** This is not controversial.
 - If God exists then it is perfectly plausible and perfectly possible for God to act within his universe. If God can create the entire universe then it is

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

perfectly reasonable to believe that he can make a blind man see or give life to a dead man.

- If you say miracles are impossible then you must realize that you are actually making the dogmatic claim that God does not exist. If you want 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.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 15)** 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 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. Can you do that? If not, then you have to at least be open to the idea that miracles may be possible.
 - So, consider your bias against the supernatural.

CONSIDER YOUR BIAS AGAINST ANCIENT PEOPLE

- Now let's turn to consider a second major bias that keeps people from believing in the miracle of Jesus' resurrection. In the second place let's **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** **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."*
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 17)** But this is simply not true. Ancient people were not so gullible as to believe in just any old miracle story.
 - When Mary came to Joseph and told him she was pregnant by the power of God, Joseph didn't say, "Oh, that makes sense!" No, Joseph knew how babies get made and so he initially decided to end their relationship.
 - The Bible is filled with ancient people who doubt miracles and are skeptical of them.
- When it comes 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. So if you asked the average person they would say, *"It's impossible and even it was, who would ever want that?"*

- 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 first 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).
 - Another time Paul stood before a man named Festus who was like the Premier of the Province. Paul talked about the resurrection of Jesus. But then we read, **(SHOW SLIDE 18) "As he was saying these things . . . Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind."** (Acts 26:24)
- My point is simply this: **(SHOW SLIDE 19) It is not true to say ancient people were more predisposed to believe miracle stories than we are today.**
 - Just 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

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 20)** At this point I want us to look at one of these ancient skeptics. He is so famous that 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 21)** First, **John challenges us to believe Jesus rose from the dead on the basis of what type of person Thomas was.**
 - John 20:24-25 says this: **(SHOW SLIDE 22) 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

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 23)** 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 miraculous.
 - 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 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 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 money 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

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

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 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 24) believe on the basis of the transformation that happened to doubting Thomas.**
 - John 20:26-27 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 25) "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.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 26)** 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."*
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 27)** Thomas said, *"Unless I . . . place my hand into his side"*
 - Jesus says, *"put out your hand, and place it in my side."*
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 28)** 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. How does Thomas respond? We read that, **(SHOW SLIDE 29) "Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (Jn 20:28)** 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"*?
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 30)** 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? Surely, he was thinking over the past few years with Jesus.

- Perhaps he remembered the time when Jesus told a paralyzed man to get up and walk and the man did just that.
- Or perhaps he was remembering the time when he told man his sins were forgiven. Only God can forgive sins so how can Jesus say such a thing?
- Or maybe he remembered when Jesus spoke to a storm and the wind and waves obeyed him.
- And now he looks into the eyes of Jesus, who was dead and gone but is now alive. Looking into the eyes of Jesus, Thomas’s 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 31)** 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 did, that God himself has been among us is quite shocking.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 32)** Author 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 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 is with us in our space, then we must come to grips with who God is and anything he might require of us.

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

- So I ask, **(SHOW SLIDE 33)** **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, **(SHOW SLIDE 34)** **“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
 - C.S. Lewis admitted the same bias before he became a Christian. He said, **(SHOW SLIDE 35)** **“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.
 - 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. **(SHOW SLIDE 36)** **“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.
- 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, **(SHOW SLIDE 37)** **“Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (Jn 20:28)**
 - 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. **(SHOW SLIDE 38)** **“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.

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

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

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 39)** Consider your biases. 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?