

Miracle

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the passage in John's Gospel where we've been studying recently, John chapter 11, and we read verses 38 to 44.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. Take away the stone, he said. But Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.

Then Jesus said, Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face.

[1 : 19] Jesus said to them, Take off the grave clothes and let him go. It is one of the settled convictions of the 20th century that miracles do not happen.

Or if they do, there is an entirely natural explanation of those things that are called miracles. In which case, they are not really miracles at all.

And it is also one of the popular notions that the Bible is crammed full of miracles. And that therefore, the Bible is a discredited book.

It belongs to a previous age when people were superstitious and credulous. We believe that miracles happened every day and that there was no rhyme or reason to the universe in which we live.

Now all of that, of course, presumes a great deal. A lot of it that is not actually true at all. But that is perhaps how many people think of the Bible and of the question of miracles.

[2 : 34] What exactly do we mean by a miracle? Here we have, in these verses, one of the great miracles of our Lord described.

Especially in verse 43, when Jesus says, Lazarus, come out. We read in the next verse, the dead man came out.

Now there we have a miracle. Perhaps the most striking miracle that the Lord performed himself. Apart from the great miracle of our Lord himself coming into the world and dying and rising again. This, perhaps, was the greatest one which he performed. But what is a miracle? How would you define it? Well, I suppose there are all kinds of ways in which people would attempt to describe what a miracle is.

But we may take just the simple, straightforward one. That a miracle is an interference with nature by supernatural power.

[3 : 36] In other words, something outside of nature. The ordinary run of affairs. Interfering with nature.

Or to put it more simply, God. Interfering with nature and the natural laws. And here we have, in this raising of Lazarus to life, a most definite interference by God.

In this case, by God's Son, Jesus Christ. With the natural process of death. Now the first question which we have to consider as we look at this miracle, is the question, are miracles possible?

Could miracles really happen? That's the first question, really, that any 20th century person has in his mind as he comes to consider a passage like this.

And I want to concentrate here today on this miracle and how it relates to the whole question of the miraculous. Throughout this passage, we haven't touched on the great central part of the passage that is the miracle.

[4 : 49] We've looked at what Jesus was teaching and doing with the people leading up to the miracle. But I want to concentrate on the miracle itself. And therefore, this first question is, is such a miracle, is it possible?

I mean, is this something that could really happen? Well, the answer to that depends upon your assumptions about the universe. In other words, what kind of universe do you think it is we're living in?

Now that's not a neutral thing. Everybody has some idea of what kind of world we live in. And today there are basically two different assumptions about what kind of universe we live in.

One is the naturalist assumption. And the other, the supernaturalist. Let's just look briefly at them. The naturalist says that there is nothing but nature.

There is nothing but the matter or energy of which this universe that we see, that we're in, that it is made up of. That is all there is. It exists by itself.

[5 : 59] There is no outside agency of any kind whatsoever. And we, as human beings, are part of this material universe. In other words, it is a closed system of natural causes.

One natural event causes another natural event. Like a cue pushing a billiard ball on the billiard table.

That is all that there is in this world. A closed system of natural causes. Now of course, in that system of belief about the universe, miracles are impossible.

Because there is no outside agency according to such a view. Anything that may be described as a miracle has to be explained in terms of natural causes.

So that you get that way of thinking about the Bible. People come along, even sometimes people who are friendly towards the Bible. Or appear to be friendly. Theologians and people like that.

[7 : 09] They come along and really what they're doing is they are explaining away the miracle. They're saying, well, this is not really saying what appears to say. For instance, the great example is when the Lord Jesus fed the 5,000 with the loaves and the fishes.

It wasn't really that he, by some great creative supernatural act, multiplied the loaves and the fishes to feed the people. But rather that when the wee boy took out his peace, everybody else took out their peace as well and shared it around.

Now that is ludicrous because that is not what the Bible says. The Bible says that these miracles took place.

But this attempt to show that there are natural explanations is coming out of that background of belief that says, really, there is nothing but the natural laws that we see.

We live in this closed system. Now, for the supernaturalists, he does not accept that assumption. He says that nature is not all there is.

[8 : 16] It doesn't exist by itself. There is one who exists by himself, and that is God. He does not depend upon anything or anyone else.

And he existed before all else. And he created this world. And he upholds this world and this universe and the laws of this universe by his power.

But he maintains the right at any time to perforate the reality of this universe by his own supernatural power.

And such perforations or interruptions or interferences, if you like to call them that, we call them miracles. That is the background against which we must place miracle in the supernaturalist way of looking at the world.

Now the question is, then, first of all, which is right? Which is right of these two assumptions, or, if you like, two philosophies about the world? Well, we can't look at this in any great detail just now.

[9 : 24] But just to say this, the naturalist has got really insuperable difficulties in his view. And these difficulties are not told to us normally by television programs and the kind of things that deal with this area.

But here are three difficulties which I believe to be insuperable. First of all, it has been discovered this century especially, and this is only percolating through now to popular science, it has been discovered this century that there is what may be called a lawless submature.

That when we penetrate by modern physics to the very smallest particles of which this universe is made, we discover that things do not appear to be under natural control, this closed system of natural causes.

Because we discover that we cannot determine the position or the velocity of these particles. These things are indeterminate, at least to us.

They seem to be happening by themselves. It's only when these particles happen in such a vast number that we can predict what is going to happen.

[10:51] So there is what may be called this lawless sub-nature, unpredictable to us. See, as Lewis has commented, if nature has a back door opening onto the sub-natural, she also may have a front door opening onto the supernatural.

Now that's one very clear way of showing that the assumptions which have been made in the naturalist point of view don't really tie in even with the most recent discoveries of modern science. But then, secondly, this theory of the universe has a disastrous effect upon knowledge, and indeed upon any thinking, by the human being.

It explains, or attempts to explain, all knowing, and indeed all thinking, in terms of purely natural or physical events.

This is like saying, what us male chauvinists might be guilty of saying at times, you think that way because you're a woman. You know, in other words, we're not saying anything about the irrationality of the actual argument put forward.

[12:09] We're not trying to disprove that this piece of knowledge or information is wrong or mistaken, but we're trying to explain away what this person has said because of their nature.

Now, that is what happens with all knowledge according to this view. Because according to this view, every event that takes place, including the events in our heads, are predetermined by the events that went before them.

And we are caught up in this great machine. Now, if that is the case, then we simply cannot help thinking in the way in which we are thinking.

We are caused in that way. And we cannot claim reason or rationality or rightness even for those things that we think.

But of course, that is absolutely devastating not only to all knowledge, but to this theory in particular. Because this theory is just part of human thinking.

[13:14] This theory, the naturalist theory. In a sense, in that way, it disproves itself. Because if it says that there is no such thing as true knowledge, then the piece of knowledge which it claims for itself also is untrue.

It's like what Charles Darwin said when he came to have doubts about his theory of evolution. He wiggled out of it by saying, ah, but my brain is only descended from a monkey's brain and who could trust that anyway?

You see? He doubted his rationality when he came to doubt his theory. But he didn't doubt his rationality when he was propounding his theory. Which of course he would have logically to do. In other words, this whole theory undermines any belief in reason or in knowledge at all. if we accept it. But surely that shows that it is an irrational and unacceptable theory.

Also, and just briefly, this theory also has disastrous effects upon morality. Because you cannot derive I ought to do something from what is.

[14:31] Now this theory simply describes what is, what exists in the world. And you cannot derive I ought from that. Really, according to this theory, to say I ought is the same as saying I itch.

It's simply describing the kind of feelings that we might have at a particular time. And it's not describing an ultimate reality of what is right and what is wrong.

And that, I'm afraid, is the position that so many are in in the world in which we live today. So that it's almost meaningless when we say to them or when someone else says to them but you ought to do that.

It is right to do that. Because they think oh, you're only describing the way you feel at this particular time. Because of the events that have caused that in your past.

You have been sort of formed in that way in your thinking by all the events that have taken place before. And that's all it is. Now you see how devastating this is to the whole question of morality.

[15:33] So these are three ways in which this theory can be shown so clearly not to fit in with what we see in the real world.

The real world of what we've called physics, the sub-mature, the real world of rationality and the real world of morality. But then if we have then looked at the question are miracles possible and we've seen really that we must come to the conclusion that this supernaturalist view is the

acceptable one, then the question still remains do miracles happen?

Okay, say we can show by these arguments I've used or show from the Bible that it is possible for miracles to happen, that God can do miracles, that God can decide to perforate the reality of this universe, enter into it at a particular point in a new or surprising way.

If it is possible for that to happen, the question still remains does it happen? Now many people may accept by their belief in God that God could do such things, but they say God is not the sort of God who would interfere with nature.

He has created nature to work according to certain laws. He's not going to interrupt or break these laws and go against what he already has done. Who says so?

[17:05] Does God tell us that in his word? No. That's only an opinion. A very wrong opinion, if I may say so, that we may have concerning God.

God decides what he can and cannot do and God decides what he will do. And in this case we see that the Bible, God's word, tells us not only that miracles are possible but that he does miracles. But then people may say, but we can't believe in a God who contradicts his own laws willy-nilly. The Bible being full of all these miraculous events and then afterwards and today we don't see those miracles.

Here we have a miracle, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. But we don't see that happening today. Death is the tragic reality that it was before Lazarus was raised from the dead and since it has remained the same.

how can we believe that God does do these miracles? Well, let's just look briefly at some of the things the Bible has to say about such things.

[18:23] Particularly to look at the whole pattern of the Bible. When we look at the Bible we don't see indiscriminate miracles. People sometimes talk of the Bible and the miraculous as if there were kind of showers of miracles that were scattered on every page you would pick up a miracle.

It's not like that. Yes, the whole Bible itself is a miraculous book as was mentioned yesterday at the day conference but you will not find a miracle described on every page of the Bible.

In fact, there are very few and very clearly defined periods when miracles took place and they are very far from being the vast majority of the history of this planet.

Very far. There are three distinct periods in the Old Testament and one of course in the New. In the Old Testament there is the period of the Exodus and the entry into the Promised Land which all took place in the space of about 50 years.

Then there is the period of Elijah and Elisha again at quite a short period the lifetime of two prophets. Then there is the period of the exile when Daniel was in Babylon again the lifetime of one man.

[19:47] And then there is the New Testament age and the life of our Lord Jesus and his apostles again for instance in the lifetime of one of the apostles say for instance John.

For very clearly defined periods when the miraculous took place. Now yes you can point maybe to one or two isolated other miracles in the scripture.

But these are the main periods of the miraculous and them being recorded for us. Now that should set us thinking right away that God does not indiscriminately interrupt or interfere with nature.

Rather he has established the natural laws as part of his purpose. And it is only for particular and very special reasons that he interrupts. And he does so because of two great things which he was doing.

The first is redemption revelation. And the second is revelation. You notice that each of these periods that we've looked at he was doing something great some great work for the people of God.

[21:07] He brought the people out of the slavery of Egypt into the promised land. And he did so by his mighty and outstretched hand. It was not by ordinary natural human means.

Yes, people like Moses were used and all the rest of it. But there was the miraculous power of God demonstrably. And similarly in each of the other periods there was something for the redemption of his people to keep or preserve his people right up to the coming of Jesus Christ.

And of course in the coming of Christ in his death and resurrection and in the act of the apostles we have his greatest work of redemption and its results.

And that is described in the New Testament. But also all of this is connected with revelation. He didn't only do these mighty works, he recorded them. And these form the great central events around which the Bible is constructed.

It is telling us of these great events, what went before them, what came after them, but these great events are central. So we see that the miraculous is not something willy-nilly.

[22 : 26] It is in fact according to a rational pattern that God laid down, that God was demonstrating that salvation was by his mighty and sovereign grace alone.

And he was demonstrating his love to man in doing these great things which man could not do. A great deal more could be said on that particular point, but we must leave that.

But secondly, we also see that the miraculous is an integral part of the biblical narrative. You can't sort of accept the teaching of the Bible and discount the miraculous, as many people have tried to do.

Let's look at this passage, and here we'll come on more to what this passage is about. The miraculous here is an integral part of this narrative.

If you take away the miraculous raising of Lazarus, the whole of it falls to pieces. For instance, the whole of this passage bears the stamp of an eyewitness account.

[23 : 35] For instance, the bit that deals with Martha. When Martha comes running out to meet Jesus, that's entirely in character with Martha, as we know her from the other Gospels too.

She comes and she speaks to Jesus, and Jesus gives her that great teaching, I am the resurrection and the life. And then she goes back and she calls her sister Mary aside, so privately, she tells her that the teacher, Jesus is here, wants to see her.

You see, it's all describing something that the person who is writing this actually saw, that is John. He saw these things happen. And the great teachings of Jesus are included in that.

Particularly, the great verse that we thought about last night, Jesus wept. Remember, that word that's used there stresses the tears in Jesus' eyes and on his cheeks perhaps.

Stressing that John was there, he saw that. He doesn't just say, Jesus cried, Jesus mourned, he says, Jesus actually shed tears. And so again, an eyewitness account of these things.

[24 : 47] Again, the raising of Lazarus. He doesn't just say, yes, Lazarus rose from the dead and that's it. But no, he describes the dead man came out. In fact, he uses this very strange expression, the dead man came out.

Really, the man now was not dead, but he's the man who had been dead. But it's just the way you would describe it, wouldn't it be, if you described something like that. And he comes out and he describes how he still had the grave clothes wrapped on him.

Something that would have struck John as an eyewitness, the incongruity of it. A man who was viewed as a dead man, a corpse, and there he was standing, walking, coming out of the tomb.

Now the whole narrative bears this stamp of an eyewitness account. The glorious, marvelous teachings which everyone wants to claim, I am the resurrection of life.

It's part of the eyewitness account, but also the description of a real, supernatural miracle. It bears the stamp of an eyewitness account too.

[25 : 50] So you can't have one without the other. And you see, that is what so many people have tried to do. They've tried to draw out spiritual truth from the Bible that is not tied into the real history of what the Bible says.

They will say, when Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life, that's real, that's true, Jesus said that, but that's only describing a new spiritual life, a kind of new feeling that you're going to have in life, or a new experience that you're going to have in life.

But you see, you can't interpret it that way, because it's here firmly embedded in the context of a man being raised from the dead. And that is what Jesus meant.

He said, I have power over death. I can give life beyond death. I can contradict death. I can raise people again from the dead. And we make nonsense of the Bible if we don't understand it in its own context and according to what it says itself.

Well then, I want to look next at the miracle itself. Just briefly on these points. The miracle here described. This miracle cannot be explained in naturalistic terms.

[27 : 14] As people have attempted to, they say, explain away the feeding of the five thousand. You cannot explain away this miracle in any such way. This man had not just a minute ago died or people thought he died and then maybe he sort of was resuscitated.

He had died four days previously. And particularly in a Middle Eastern country, as Martha so points out, he already, his body, the body of that brother whom she loved, would already be decayed.

And this is mentioned, not only simply because Martha said it, but to demonstrate the real miraculous power of Jesus Christ.

He raised this dead, decaying corpse back to newness of life. Now that is the astounding thing about what is said here.

Notice to the divine command that Jesus issues. It's a very abrupt thing he says. He says, Lazarus out here. Literally, that's what he says.

[28 : 24] Lazarus out here. As if he was talking to Lazarus when he had been alive, he was in the house and he was warning him out and he said, Lazarus out here. That's what he said. Now, no mere man could issue such a command.

But Jesus here demonstrating his divinity, his divine power to command the dead to arise, says, Lazarus, come out. And also, we see that when Lazarus was raised, his rising back to life was, it appears, a different kind of resurrection from the Lord's resurrection itself when we come to see that and our own resurrections as we think about those in the future.

he, it would appear, was brought back to the same kind of ordinary mode of existence which he had before. In other words, it's just like those words that we read in the children's book, death worked backwards.

Jesus, by his divine sovereign power, reversed the processes of death, the processes of decay in the body, he reversed it so that he came back to be the living person that he was before.

Now, the evidence for saying that it was that and not like Jesus' resurrection, arising to a new kind of life, is because here, Lazarus simply sort of tumbles out of the tomb with all the grave clothes still around him.

[30 : 04] Whereas when Jesus rises from the dead, you'll notice that the grave clothes are left lying exactly as they had been, wrapped around him with the head napkin lying apart by itself.

In other words, when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose, yes, with the same body, but a transformed, a transfigured body for which material things were no barrier.

With Lazarus, it appears that it was different. But there is the miracle itself, a real flesh and blood, if you like. Miracle.

Finally, then, just this point, the significance of this miracle. And from that, perhaps, we'll learn something about the significance of miracles in general. We'll notice here that in this passage, Jesus himself ties it in to faith.

In verse 40, he says to Martha, who had begun to have doubts, or she just didn't know what really to expect when Jesus said, take away the stone.

[31 : 12] She could only think, she could only focus on her dead brother. And she had put out of her mind what Jesus had said, and what she herself had said concerning him being able to do things, whatever he asked would happen.

Jesus said, and so here, Jesus says to her, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? If you believed.

And then later on, in verse 42, he says, I knew that you always hear me, this is a prayer to his father, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.

Throughout this whole story, he's been concerned about Martha and Mary and the others, and he's concerned for their faith, their belief in him. He said from the very beginning that this sickness was not unto death, it is for God's glory, so that God's son may be glorified through it.

Now let's just look at this for a minute. This miracle was done, it would appear, first of all, out of love. Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus.

[32 : 32] And when he wept at the tomb, part of it was, there was more to it as we've seen already, but part of it was he loved that family. And he was hurt, and he was angry, at that family being broken.

And he, by his divine power, was in this particular unique case, going to demonstrate what will finally be the reality for all Christian families.

He demonstrated that he could unify them and bring them back together. God's son. But also, this miracle was done to teach the truth.

It was done to teach the truth about Jesus himself. It was done to teach all the people there who Jesus is. Only God can command, dead man, come forth.

and the dead man come. And Jesus was there demonstrating who he is, demonstrating his glory as the glory of God. You see, he said, this sickness is not unto death, it's so that the glory of God might be made manifest.

[33 : 43] That was what happened. That's what he says to Martha. He says, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? It was demonstrating that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

That it also teaches the truth about his victory over death. It teaches that he has authority, not only authority on earth to forgive sin, which he already claimed, but authority to overcome death. And he, in a few days, is going to demonstrate. That, finally, by his own death and resurrection. But here we see it clearly in this particular instance, that he will work a defeat of death for all who believe in him, so that finally there will be our resurrection, a reuniting of body and soul. All the ravages of sin and of evil and of death in this world, reversed, done away with, and we transformed into his likeness.

But all of this, his love for them, his teaching about himself, his teaching about his great work of reversing death, it was all done to encourage faith in those who were there.

[35 : 08] To stir up the faith that already was there in Martha and Mary. Faith that in Martha was flagging in face of the awfulness of the tomb.

But also to engender faith in those around who already did not believe in him. That they would have revealed to them his glory in this way.

So you see, the miracles are there in scripture. For these things, because God loves us in Jesus Christ, and he wants us to see what his great work of redemption accomplished.

But they are there too to teach us about Jesus and his great power and the majesty of his person. They are there to turn our eyes to him, to trust in him.

And all that I have said today, and all that could ever be said about miracles, would be absolutely useless if today you did not believe in Jesus Christ as your savior and the one who died for you and has risen again for you.

[36 : 22] That is what it's all about. It's not just to stimulate our gray matter to think about these great questions, but it is to change our lives and to give us a real living faith in Jesus Christ.

That is what he wants us to have. But you'll notice the passage we read in Luke's gospel, it stressed this, that even this great miracle, the raising of Lazarus, and even the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself, is not enough to change the stony hearts of men.

Remember at the end of that parable Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, he said, even though someone should rise from the dead, they still will not believe. And we see the truth of that within a few verses of this.

The opponents of Jesus are plotting his downfall, even though they know that he has done miraculous signs. Although you may know today, you may be convinced in your head that what I've said is true.

You need the power and the spirit of God to transform you. If you are not already convinced by what God's word says to you, pray and pray urgently that his spirit would convince you of the truth of these things and turn to him in loving faith and with a good hope for the future.

[37 : 55] Let us pray. O our gracious and loving heavenly Father, we bless you for these things you have revealed to us.

We thank you for the word of God which proclaims these things to all. And we pray, Lord, that today you would bless your word and gospel, that these things would begin to have a transforming effect not only upon lives here and there, but upon the whole culture and ethos of our society, turning us back from the foolishness of a belief in a dead universe.

Believe in the living God who created all things for his own glory and for the eternal salvation of all who believe in him.

Turn us to yourself in such loving trust. we pray, gracious Lord, that you would indeed comfort us each one with these great truths when we take them for ourselves.

And as we contemplate death, the death of loved ones, or our own death, that we may be able to say with this psalmist, even though I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me.

[39 : 20] These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.