

Lesson 40: Chapter 5: Paragraph 3: Miracles

OUTLINE

God only works by miracles
God never works by miracles
God also works by miracles

INTRODUCTION

‘God, in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at his pleasure.’ This is the shortest paragraph in the confession so far but by no means unimportant. Today we want to consider what the confession says about miracles. We live in an age of extremes. In my early Christian years I was part of the Charismatic Church and part of your thinking is that miracles are a normative part of the Christian life, where daily miracles are taking place. The worship of the church was organised assuming that all the miraculous gifts of God from apostle to tongues are to be present. I believed that miracles were absolutely essential in preaching the gospel as well. I was part of pentecostal evangelistic crusade mentality which believed that miracles would make for more people responding to altar calls. Show them the power of God and they would see God is real and respond. On the other extreme is the Scientism that underlies all Western society that cannot have God, or the supernatural, or souls, or angels, or demons, or miracles. And then add to this the many scammers who pretend to do miracles to get money out of people; and the mass hysteria that causes large groups of people to bark like dogs and roll around in laughter; and the weak doctrine of those who are so big on the miraculous. This can filter into Christianity as people who are allergic to any talk of miracles as some kind of hysteria, superstition, and an anti-supernatural bias. The confession charts the biblical and balanced way of thinking on these matters. This short statement stresses that most of the time God is not doing miracles, yet is still at work in what we call His ordinary means; but is also free to do miracles. We will think through three positions. The hypersupernaturalistic perspective that everything is miraculous; the antisupernaturalistic view that says God can’t do miracles. And the biblical view that God also does miracles, yet mostly uses ordinary means.

God only works through miracles

Let’s begin with hypersupernaturalism. This is something rife in the majority of the church today because most of Christianity is Charismatic in nature. This view believes that because Jesus has ascended into heaven and poured out His Spirit, our lives should look like those of the early Church and be full of miracles. We should be seeing the office of apostle alive and active, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. We should be seeing miracles of healing, words of wisdom and knowledge, tongues and interpretation, as well as the miracles of shadows and handkerchiefs healing. Because Jesus promised that we would do greater miracles than Him, we should be seeing walking on water, raising the dead, angels visiting us to strengthen us, the casting out of demons, etc. etc. Any miracle that any person experienced in the Bible is an invitation for you to expect it for yourself. So there are claims of people going to heaven and to hell; even visiting the New Jerusalem. This view of how we live our daily lives as Christians has a significant impact. I will speak from my own experience. Because prayer was this new power that always got what it asked for when you

claimed it in the name of Jesus with enough faith, as long as you hadn't committed sin recently. My friend and I would pray for four hours a day, feeling guilty that if we did not no one else would and it all rested on our shoulders. Because prayer had so much power we happily quit our jobs to give our mornings to prayer and our afternoons to evangelism. Instead of studying the Bible to know God and His will as He has revealed it, we gave priority to an inward voice, expecting that God was having a constant conversation and we simply had to tune in. To do anything because the Bible says so, was the letter and it kills, it quenched the Spirit, you needed to hear the Spirit because the children of God are led by the Spirit of God. This led to us putting words in God's mouth as we attributed His will to our emotions and inner thoughts. This led to a fixation upon the devil and a preoccupation with techniques to find out the names of demons over certain areas, discovering generational curses that were blocking our effectiveness, constantly binding and loosing in every situation, blaming sinful desires on demons and getting demons cast out. In counselling others you would not address the sin in the heart and take them to the revealed will of God in the Bible, you would always be looking for some spiritual solution. I remember one evening service the whole church was invited to go and pray at the house of a couple that was having difficulty, as if the presence of praying people would somehow change the sinful hearts of those destroying their own marriage. Prayer, evangelism, counselling, holiness, worshipping as a Church, discovering God's will, parenting, strengthening one's marriage, you name it, this sort of hypersupernaturalism leaves you barren of God's true resources and we see damage going on in every area as a result of this neglect. Not to mention the irreverence as God is ordered around; the presumption as the Spirit is depersonalized into an anointing or force that works like a contagion; where the name of Jesus is reduced to a lucky charm or ward; where the great gift of God's word is looked down upon as unspiritual, and on and on we could go.

There is a more philosophically nuanced view of this called Occasionalism where men like Jonathan Edwards in an overreaction to modernism and rationalism that created things like Deism tried to over do it by making every moment that God sustains His creation as a miracle. Unfortunately he denied the reality of contingency and made everything necessary and a direct unmediated act of God.

God never works by miracles

As Christians we meet the other extreme view created by the scientism of our age that there are no miracles, no angels, no God. A famous argument against miracles was brought by the philosopher David Hume. His thinking went something like this. The rational person makes a distinction between proof that makes a thing certain, and proof that only makes a thing probable. In order for a thing to be proof it basically has to be incontestable. When it comes to miracles Hume would have us picture a scale in our minds. On the one side of the scale we have a once off occurrence we call a miracle, let's say the virgin birth. But on the other side of the scale is every other instance of a baby being made by the natural means of sperm and egg. On the basis of this scale, miracles cannot be admitted as proof. On the basis of Hume's thinking they are disqualified by definition.

Richard Dawkins is a modern day supporter of Hume's views. In his children's book *The Magic of Reality*, he writes, 'Hume didn't come right out and say

miracles are impossible. Instead he asked us to think of a miracle as an improbable event — an event whose improbability we might estimate. The estimate doesn't have to be exact. It's enough that the improbability of a suggested miracle can be roughly placed on some sort of scale, and then compared with an alternative explanation such as hallucination or a lie.¹ However, we must point out that Hume's scales are weighted, miracles are by definition not as regular as natural occurrences and so will always be at a disadvantage. Hume himself admitted that even fantastic things like someone who was dead coming back from the grave would be better doubted than believed by his thinking. This is a clear case of a logical fallacy we call begging the question. Miracles don't happen because we have already rigged it so that they are disqualified as miracles because they are outnumbered by natural occurrences. This begging the question is a logical fallacy, and it is a product of unbelieving assumptions not biblical teaching.

God also works by miracles

We come now to the position of the confession and the Bible that God does do miracles, He is free to work without means, like when He made creation out of nothing. He is free to work above means, that is to stretch ordinary expectations like Sarah having a child at 90, cause an axe head to float, and ensure Daniel's friends did not even smell like smoke. And He is free to work against means like overcoming the litres of water with fire which Elijah poured over the sacrifice. But the confession stresses a proportion, that the ordinary way in which God works, in other words, the way in which He works most of the time is the ordinary way not by miracles. I find this doctrine to be very freeing because it sets me free to focus on pursuing that natural and ordinary things that are appointed by God and within by grasp and ability to do. We find that the ordinary means often comes with a clear set of responsibilities that we are to do.

If I want to be healthy, I should exercise, eat well, and avoid dangerous activities which cause injuries. I do not have to believe that Jesus died not only for my sins but also my sicknesses and plead the blood for my health. Can God do a miracle and heal me? Yes, are even encouraged to pray for healing, but we must also recognise that the modern view of miracles in answer to every prayer is not biblical.

If I want my daily needs to be provided for, those who do not work should not eat. So study when you are young to equip yourself for a skill or trade that you can use to support a family. Go out and find a job. Work hard at your job. Put your mind to expanding your skill set, and if your needs increase take on extra work. Don't go into debt; don't make irresponsible decisions. You do not have to do a forty day fast for financial breakthrough, if you apply yourself to the pattern of work and worship commanded in the 4th commandment. Can God miraculously provide and grant me a windfall? Yes, but this does not deny the responsibilities that we have, we must be careful of short cuts and laziness.

If I want to know God's will for my life. I must begin with the Bible and the revealed will of God. I don't need a constant inner voice, spiritual nudges, fleeces, or miraculously opened doors to know that God requires me to be holy, like Christ, to love my neighbour, to be generous, a good spouse, a faithful parent, a hard worker, a respectful citizen. I cannot break God's plans because

¹ https://evolutionnews.org/2011/12/the_magic_of_re/

His perfect will will come to pass. I cannot miss God if I am making the best God glorifying decision I know how to make. If I am torn between two good and godly options, I will not be sinning or cause some great calamity by choosing one above the other. If I am faced with two choices that are not sinful and I just prefer one above the other I don't have to make some weird sacrificial gesture and choose the one I don't like as if God were laying a test or trap for me. Can God give me a clear feeling given by an inward work of the Spirit? Yes of course, but we must recognise that God has given us His word as the thing which makes us sufficient for every good deed.

Coming to grips with these truths showed me the importance of God's providence in the areas of evangelism, spiritual growth and the importance of the local church. God's most common way of working is by the Spirit through the Word; the word is the Sword of the Spirit. God's word will not return to Him void. One of the proof texts given is Is. 55:10-11, 'For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.' God has appointed that in the area of evangelism, sanctification and church growth the word will have a central role and will be the common tool of the Spirit.

Romans 10:9-15 is ample proof of this: 'because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

When it comes to sanctification, John 17:17, 'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.' Eph. 5:25-26, 'Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word' Ps. 1:2-3, 'but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.'

When it comes to why we need to go to church and the Spirit using the word in all aspects of the service, Eph. 4:11-16, 'And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by

every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.'

Our emphasis on the bible is not a denial of the Spirit but a recognition of God's ordinary means of working. For this reason we make our lives as rich in the Bible as possible. God's power works in hidden and seemingly weak ways as He works invisibly, and even powerfully yet through very ordinary activities. For this reason we apply ourselves diligently to study, to prayer, to obedience, to preaching, and trusting in God to bring about the results as He works by His ordinary providence.