

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Show Stoppers

Does God Intervene?

(1 Corinthians 15)

Study #4

Introduction: Trust vs. gullibility...

With the 2008 elections of Barak Obama for President, along with the newly minted 111th Congress and numerous governors and local officials just weeks in the rear view mirror, I've been doing some thinking recently about the importance of the vote.

Your vote and my vote counts. Each and every vote counts!

That idea is being played out in a new comedy starring Kevin Costner, "Swing Vote," where the plot line has the election of the American president hinging on the one vote of Bud Johnson (Costner's character), an apathetic, beer slinging, lovable loser.

That movie is fiction, of course. But throughout history, wherever there has been the privilege of the vote, election after election has proven the power of one individual's vote.

- In 1645 one vote gave Oliver Cromwell control of Great Britain.
- In 1649 one vote caused Charles I of England to be executed.
- In 1776 one vote gave America the English language, not German.
- In 1845 one vote brought Texas into the Union.
- In 1875 one vote changed France from a monarchy to a republic.
- In 1923 one vote gave Adolf Hitler control of the Nazi Party in Germany.

Your vote is VERY important, as each and every one of these historical tidbits illustrates.

And, according to meticulous research conducted by the good folks at the urban-legend-bashing website www.snopes.com, you should know that each and every one of these historical tidbits is false.

Despite the fact that they are not facts, in election cycle after election cycle, these items are paraded as fact to encourage people to vote.

Just as reliably, well-meaning people still distribute the warning that Madalyn Murray O'Hair is circulating a petition to ban religious radio broadcasting from American airwaves (ignoring the fact that O'Hair is long dead and that even when alive she never did this).

Gullibility is a problem. And nobody wants to **be** or to **be known as** gullible. (By the way, did you hear that Webster took the word "gullible" out of the dictionary...?)

At the same time, trust is important. Jesus said that we are to be like trusting children and the Bible puts **faith** up there with **hope** and **love** as one of the three cardinal virtues.

We want to be trusting souls and we need to avoid getting taken in. The goal is to stay between the extremes of over-cautious distrust and foolish gullibility.

Paying close attention to these two extremes will be important for the next few minutes as we consider another in our series of critical "life and God" questions.

The life and God question we are going to tackle this morning may hit especially close to home if you consider yourself something of a hard sell, or if you have sort of a "prove it to me" attitude.

I'll even invite you to put on your skeptic's hat today as we consider the theme of **MIRACLES**.

Now there are lots and lots of questions that may come to our minds as soon as we start thinking of miracles. Among them:

- Aren't miracles contrary to the laws of science?
- How can a rational person today accept the miracle stories of the Bible?
- Can miracles be reconciled with a modern view of the world?

These and other questions need to be addressed. But, before we get very far into this topic, I want to take a moment to define what I'm talking about when I speak of miracles.

There are those, of course, who consider every wonderful event "miraculous."

Waxing poetic, they will tell us that the growth of a plant and the design of the human body and the birth of a baby and the sunrise and sunset are miracles.

But for our purposes today, I want to insist that every wonderful thing is not necessarily a miraculous thing.

Webster defines our word for us - miracle: *an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.*

Or, for a little bit shorter version, I'll suggest that a miracle is *God's temporary suspension of natural law.*

Using this definition, this morning we're going to explore the possibility of miracles having occurred and the possibility that God might intervene in our world.

I'll be the first to grant that miracles are hard to believe in. Perhaps like you, I'm skeptical when I hear reports of a miracle occurring today. And I'm not convinced that my skepticism is a bad thing.

There is something very wholesome about not being gullible and being wisely suspicious about accounts of miracles. *We should* wrestle with the miraculous.

At the same time, the question of miracles is a critical one for Christianity!

Many religions contain unbelievable legends of epic proportions, and of course religious mythology is common. But if you take legend and myth away from Hinduism and Buddhism and scores of other religions, the religious system remains intact.

Not so for Christianity!

Miracles are woven deep into the very fabric of Christianity (and Judaism).¹ For that reason, Christianity stands or falls with the miraculous. Take miracle away from Christianity and there is nothing left but an empty shell.

Given what is at stake, let's take a few minutes and consider the possibility of the miraculous. Some people are certain that miracles are simply impossible.

Miracles are IMPOSSIBLE...

...because there is no God

Atheism's claim

Some of those who claim the impossibility of miracles are those who say that there is no God in the universe.²

That stands to reason. If miracles are, by definition, the special work of God, then the absence of God pretty seals the deal. Miracles can't happen in a God-less universe.

But there are challenges to this objection to miracles.

Atheism's weakness

On the one hand, there is the weighty evidence for the existence of God. We see it in nature, in human nature, and in the cosmos.

And on the other hand, (and as I've argued over the last three Sundays), none of us knows enough to be thoroughgoing atheists.

¹ While taking a class in World Religions at my college, a professor in the philosophy department assured us students that Christianity and Judaism were unique among the world's religions in that they were not based in legend or myth or philosophy, but in history.

² Some philosophers define miracles as that which cannot occur. David Hume held that no amount of evidence can establish that a miracle has occurred. What a remarkably disingenuous piece of circular reasoning!

There's way too much to be known in the universe that we don't know for any of us to be able to say, with certainty, "*There is no God.*"

Frankly, I think it is too big a leap of faith to disbelieve in God! And if there is the possibility of God's existence, there is also at least the theoretical possibility of the miraculous.

UNLESS, of course, God has chosen not to or for some reason cannot intervene in the affairs of the world He has made. And there have been many brilliant people who have held to this opinion, from 18th century Deists to modern-day rationalists.

...because there can be no violation of natural order

The universe IS orderly

You and I live in a world that is organized around orderly patterns and systems. This orderliness argues powerfully for the existence of God.

We see the order in seasons, weather patterns, the gravitational pull that creates tides, the migration patterns of animals - and more.

But some have taken what we observe about the world's orderliness, have made those natural laws unbreakable, and have assumed that nothing is greater than these natural laws - not even God!

"Orderliness" as an argument for NO miracles...?

The metaphor commonly used by these folks to describe the universe is that of a clock that has been "wound up" (how's that for a "dated" illustration?).

Eons ago God "wound the clock" and then adopted a hands off policy, allowing the universe to run on its own with no involvement and no interference.

One of the best known proponents of this view was Thomas Jefferson, one of our nation's founding fathers.

Jefferson actually took a razor and meticulously cut out passages from the Gospels that recorded miracles. What was left was a very different book, a work he titled The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth.³ At the end of his project, he is reported to have said, "*NOW, at last, we have a good book.*"

This position, though, that God doesn't (or can't) interfere, rings hollow to me. It denies an omnipotent God the authority to break in to His own creation. It seems to me that if there is a God, miracles are possible.

And yet some will still argue that science can or will explain all events that happen in the world - even those that appear to be "miraculous."

What does science prove?

In his excellent book, The Reason for God, Timothy Keller quotes John Macquarrie who explains why miracles are impossible:⁴

"Science proceeds on the assumption that whatever events occur in the world can be accounted for in terms of other events...just as...this-worldly. [So]... miracle is irreconcilable with our modern⁵ understanding of both science and history."

Did you hear that? The idea is that we should only consider the possibility that science will answer the questions we have about events that defy explanation. The "God possibility" should not even be considered.

I like the response of Christian philosopher Alvin J. Platinga to MacQuarrie. He writes, "*This argument is like that of the [man] who insists on looking for his lost car key only under the streetlight on the grounds that the light is better there.*"

³ Jefferson, Thomas, The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, published Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1904.

⁴ A Scottish theologian and philosopher who died in 2007, he tried to mesh existential philosophy with orthodox Christianity, resulting in a denial of the miraculous while affirming the ethical teachings of the Bible (shades of Thomas Jefferson!). Among MacQuarrie's major influences was the German theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, who disbelieved most every major historic Christian doctrine.

⁵ Surely, "modern" has got to be one of the most presumptuous and relative words in the English language! Think of how "un-modern" we consider those who lived a hundred years ago - and how "un-modern those who follow will consider us.

I have great respect for science and for the scientific method. Science is a wonderful tool for gaining a great deal of knowledge about really, really important things. But just as it is a wise man who knows his limits, so science must recognize its limits.

Science can tell us much about repeatable natural occurrences. But it cannot prove that a non-repeatable occurrence (such as an event we might refer to as a miracle) is **NOT** the result of God's intervention.

To say that science can or will prove miracles impossible is not a statement of science, but of "scientism."⁶

If there is a God, then it follows that He can intervene in history and that He can violate normally fixed laws to accomplish something special. This is what the Bible says God does when He performs miracles.

At this point, I'd like to take a moment and debunk a commonly held perception about the Bible.

I think that this misperception of what the Bible is all about actually hinders many people from accepting its teachings.

Some people believe that miracles make up the bulk of the material we find in the Bible. And that is just not true!

Miracles MAY have Occurred

Biblical Miracles are Infrequent

Miracles don't pop up on every page of the Bible. Far from it. The miracles of the Bible are clustered around three time periods of roughly 50-100 years each.

Miracles primarily occurred during the lives of:

- Moses and Joshua;
- Elijah and Elisha;
- Jesus and the apostles.

⁶ It is worldview and philosophy that would lead someone to say, "There can be no miracles", not science.

There are hundreds of years of biblical history that do not record a single overtly miraculous event.⁷

Even during the life of Jesus, a life marked by the miraculous more than any other Person, was not a string of one long line of miracle stories. There were many days when He performed no miracles.

At the same time, the Gospels do present Him as a miracle-worker. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record about thirty five separate miracles performed by Jesus.

Through these miracles, He demonstrated His authority over nature, disease, demons and death.

But Jesus never used His power to "dazzle" or for "shock and awe" effect. He performed His miracles to prove something about who He was. In fact, while many of His miracles were performed in public, there was often a great sense of restraint about them.⁸

They were always done purposefully, with a view to something redemptive. And even though many of those who witnessed the miracles were hostile to Jesus, none of His critics ever denied that His miracles occurred.⁹

Still, while Jesus' contemporaries accepted His miracles, more modern audiences have tried to explain away His miracles, sometimes on the grounds of the supposed ignorance of ancient peoples.

Before swallowing this line of thinking, though, we should listen to C.S. Lewis' warning about what he called "chronological snobbery."

⁷ This is not to say that God was not active during these periods of time when miracles are not recorded. But He often uses a "light hand" to direct history, as He does, I believe, in most cases today.

⁸ Jesus used His miraculous power to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, and to raise the dead. His miracles restored the natural order to God's original design. His miracles are not just proofs that He has power but also wonderful foretastes of what he is going to do with that power, not just challenges to our minds, but promises to our hearts that the world we all want is coming.

⁹ Acts 2:22 - Peter referred to "Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst."

Beware of “Chronological Snobbery”

Lewis warned against the assumption that people in previous ages were so gullible that they could be duped into thinking that practically anything was a miracle.

They’ll tell us, “*Go back to the Middle Ages with an iPhone and the people will consider it miraculous.*”

But that’s not fair! How would YOU react if someone walked up to your boat in the middle of Medina Lake, or instantly gave sight to someone in your family who had been born blind, or raised someone from the dead with a word?

Ancient Roman citizens were civilized people who knew as well as we do that there are no naturalistic explanations for such events.

Today, as well, people will sometimes try to sell us on the idea that what is recorded in the Bible as a miracle wasn’t really a miracle at all. As in the time when:

- Jesus was walking on water - this is explained as Jesus walking on a sandbar in the Sea of Galilee (hmmm... - a sand bar in the middle of the Sea, next to which a boat could float and Peter could sink...);
- Jesus turned fish and loaves into a meal for thousands - this is explained by the “miracle of sharing” by a young lad whose generosity with his lunch prompted other people to share their own (an explanation that does serious injustice to the biblical text)

There is no question but that the Bible presents true-blue miracles as having happened from time to time. The Bible claims that God has stepped in and temporarily suspended the laws of nature that are normally in place in order to accomplish His purposes.

But, even if the Bible tells us about miracles and we have agreed that they are theoretically possible, the question is still unanswered, “*Have miracles ACTUALLY occurred?*”

And to address that question in particular, I’d like to present, for your consideration, evidence for the greatest miracle claimed by Christianity or any other faith: the resurrection of Jesus.¹⁰

Miracles HAVE Occurred

The Unconvincing Nature of Miracles

Before considering the evidence for the resurrection, though, I’m going to make what may be one of the more unpopular comments I’ll make today about miracles.

Many of us will admit to wishing that we could see a true-blue miracle. Not that I’m saying that some of you may not have. Some of you here may have seen the unmistakable hand of God move in a miraculous way. (“the temporary suspension of natural law”)

But most of us have not seen a genuine miracle - and most of us who have not seen one wouldn’t mind seeing one! Give me a burning bush or a parted Red Sea and I’d get pretty excited! My faith would grow! I’d trust God more!!

But, even as I think those thoughts, I am sobered to realize that there were many, many people who saw the miracles of the Bible and who did not trust God as a result.

- The generation that crossed into the wilderness after the miracles in Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea still rebelled against God.
- The people who saw Elijah’s miracles continued their idolatry.
- The same people who ate the bread Jesus multiplied yelled “Crucify Him!” on Good Friday.¹¹

Ready for the unpopular, sad comment? Here it is: **Even seeing a miracle doesn’t guarantee a faith response in the one who witnesses it.**

¹⁰ If you are interested in looking at some original research, I recommend an excellent book by Josh McDowell, Evidence That Demands a Verdict.

¹¹ The apostles of Jesus are said to have been “doubtful” while standing with the resurrected Jesus on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:17) right before He gave them The Great Commission.

BUT, while miracles may not create faith, they can strengthen faith. And solid evidence for a biblical miracle can help convince sincere seekers after God of the reasonableness of believing in a miracle-working God.

So, without further delay, let's consider the resurrection.

Test Case: The resurrection of Jesus

Intro: The importance of the resurrection

I want to consider this miracle because it is so stupendous and because the whole Christian faith depends upon it.

The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that if we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. In other words, if Jesus' body is still lying in Joseph's tomb, the Bible's not worth the paper it's printed on, we've placed our faith in an unworthy person, and we might as well all go home.¹² The resurrection is THAT important.

First, let's consider the historical facts surrounding the death of Jesus.

Historical facts

Pre-resurrection events

He was put to death by crucifixion, a most gruesome and agonizing death.

Jesus had spent the evening before His crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemene praying fervently, had been violently arrested by the Romans and Jews, and had been passed back and forth all night standing trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

¹² Frank Morrison planned to write a book that would lay the myth of the resurrection to rest. But his book, Who Moved the Stone?, was a result of his having converted to Christianity in light of the evidence for the resurrection. General Lew Wallace was overwhelmed by the historical evidence for the resurrection and ended up writing Ben Hur as a new believer in Christ. C.S. Lewis and Malcolm Muggeridge are skeptics who converted to Christianity because of the evidence for the resurrection.

In other words, by the time He was crucified, He had already been abused and was already exhausted.

Before He was ever nailed through His hands and feet to the cross, He had been crowned with a crown of thorns with three inch long spikes, scourged (a brutal beating that frequently killed its victims) and had carried His cross (with some help from Simon of Cyrene) the distance from Pilate's Praetorium to Golgotha.

Following six agonizing hours on the cross, the Roman guards pronounced Jesus dead. Then, friends placed His body in a securely guarded tomb, that of Joseph of Arimathea and guards were posted. A seal was set and a large stone was rolled in front of the cave.

All we know about the disciples is that they were extremely discouraged and fearful, most of them having fled the night before when Jesus was arrested.

The Bible goes on to tell us that after the Friday afternoon death and burial, two women found a very different scene when they went to Joseph's tomb to finish the embalming work that had been cut short on Friday because of the onset of the Jewish Sabbath.

Post-resurrection events

When they arrived at the tomb, they found no soldiers and a rolled away stone. The grave clothes in which Jesus had been wrapped were empty and Jesus' body was nowhere to be found. In short, the tomb was unoccupied.

How can the empty tomb of Jesus be explained?

How to explain the empty tomb

The tomb was still occupied

It is plausible to wonder if the confused, grieving women went to the wrong tomb and that Joseph's tomb was actually still occupied by the body of Jesus on Easter Sunday morning.

What is not plausible is to think that after the women went to the wrong tomb NOBODY would have checked the right tomb. Surely somebody, eventually would have checked Joseph's tomb to see if Jesus' body was there.

No, Joseph's tomb was empty. How did it get empty? Perhaps Jesus' disciples stole the body.

This is an ancient theory, but it stretches credulity to the breaking point.

The tomb was empty

PERHAPS JESUS' BODY WAS STOLEN

Those who would consider this are asking us to believe that fearful disciples purposefully perpetrated a hoax that they knew would result in their becoming the enemies of Rome. That they intentionally stole Jesus' body, knowing that they would be arrested, tortured and finally executed for proclaiming that Jesus - who had been crucified as an enemy of the state - was Lord, not Caesar.

People around the world will often die for what they believe in. But very few willingly give up their lives for what know to be false. And that is what we are being asked to believe the disciples did in stealing the body of Jesus and then proclaiming Him risen from the dead.

We are also being asked to believe that the disciples fought off a Roman guard and rolled away a two ton stone in order to carry out the heist! I don't find this idea compelling...

On the other hand, it may have been the Jews who stole Jesus' body. This is the other option for body snatching, but it is even less likely than the first.

Even while He was alive, the Jewish leaders were trying to put an end to all the excitement about Jesus. And if, after He was dead, they could have produced His body, THAT would have put an end to the Jesus movement. Trust me. If they could have produced the body, they would have.

Another possible explanation for the empty tomb is that Jesus, perhaps, did not actually die on the cross.

PERHAPS JESUS "SWOONED" ON THE CROSS

This theory says that Jesus, only appearing to be dead, was taken off the cross and then was resuscitated by the cool air of the tomb.

But, when we trace this idea to its logical end, we have to exercise more faith than we do in simply believing the resurrection.

It would mean that Jesus endured the beatings at His trials, the crown of thorns, the terrible scourging, the crucifixion, and even the spear thrust into His side and somehow managed to survive.

Of course He was dead enough looking to have convinced the professional executioners that He was actually dead, who took Him off the cross and let Him be wrapped in a hundred pounds of gummy spices.

But if we assume that He was not WHOLLY dead, just mostly dead, then we have to say that in spite of great loss of blood and many hours in the cold tomb without food, water, or assistance, He revived and managed to escape from the grave clothes and spices and replace them neatly in the tomb.

Following this, He then rolled the huge stone up an incline away from the opening, overcame armed guards, walked miles on nail-pierced feet, and convinced His disciples that He had conquered death and was the resurrected Author of life.

This theory would also have us believe that Jesus lived on after all this and died a natural death in obscurity.

It is hard to explain the empty tomb except on the grounds of resurrection. But in addition to the empty tomb, we also have to explain the many appearances of Jesus to His disciples after His resurrection.

How to explain the appearance

It does as little good to suggest that they were lying about this as it did to suggest that they were lying about His resurrection.

For by proclaiming that they had seen Him, they were setting themselves up for extreme persecution.

And to say, “They were just hallucinating” doesn’t ring true either, for His appearances violate everything we know about the nature of hallucinations.

- Hallucinations are usually experienced by people who are longing to see what they hallucinate about (i.e. - a mother longs to see her son who is off at war). But the disciples who saw Jesus weren’t expecting to see Him and had lost all hope of ever seeing Him again.
- Hallucinations don’t happen to groups. Yet Jesus was seen by individuals, by two disciples on the road to Emmaus, by the whole group of disciples on several occasions, and once by as many as 500 people, many of whom were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians!
- Hallucinations usually persist for a long, long time in the imagination of the one who has a hallucination. But Jesus’ appearances abruptly ceased exactly forty days after His resurrection. During those forty days, He appeared often, ate fish, walked through walls, cooked on the beach and walked along dusty roads with His followers. But after forty days, none of His disciples ever claimed to see Him again.

Added to the empty tomb and the appearances, there is other evidence for Jesus’ resurrection.

Other evidence

Consider the following...

- Christ predicted His own resurrection;¹³
- Jewish leaders never contradicted claims of Jesus’ resurrection;¹⁴
- The disciples exhibited newfound fearlessness;¹⁵
- The church shifted to Sunday worship;¹⁶
- The church disregarded Jesus’ tomb;¹⁷

¹³ Matthew 17:23; 20:19

¹⁴ While there was great opposition to the movement that followed Jesus, the fact of His resurrection was never challenged

¹⁵ How can the psychological change in the disciples be explained apart from their actual experience of a resurrected Jesus?

¹⁶ The switch for devout Jews from regular Sabbath worship to worship on the first day of the week is a powerful argument for the resurrection.

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is so weighty that a number of skeptics have become Christians after having investigated it for themselves.

Frank Morrison was an attorney who had set out to prove Christianity false by disproving the resurrection. His research, however, convinced him of the truth of the resurrection and he ended up writing Who Moved the Stone?, a brilliant defense of the resurrection!¹⁸

Given the evidence, it’s time for the final question: So what? So what if Jesus was raised from the dead? What difference does it make that He intervened in human history?

Conclusion:

Today we often use the term “intervention” to describe an orchestrated event in which someone who is struggling with a damaging habit is forced to face reality, reckon with the consequences of continued misbehavior, and change.

The Bible teaches that, from time to time, God has “intervened” and we call these interventions “miracles.” He orchestrates His interventions for the same reason that we orchestrate interventions in the lives of people we love. He wants to move us to reckon with the biggest reality there is - Him!

The purpose of all of God’s interventions throughout history has been to call us to Himself. Considering the evidence for the resurrection, especially, won’t you turn to Him and give Him your trust, today?

¹⁷ Monuments are normally built to venerate the memory of dead heroes, from Lenin to American presidents. The lack of a monument for Jesus tells us that the disciples knew full well that there was no body to venerate!

¹⁸ Others who have converted to Christianity after being convinced of the evidence for the resurrection are Malcolm Muggeridge, General Lew Wallace and C.S. Lewis.