

Chapter 1

The Place, Nature and Need of Miracle

THE INVISIBLE hand of God has been amply illustrated in *The Ways of Providence*. God's hand may work—and often does work—in affairs of a natural form and complexion, without being discernible in the operation. This we have learnt from the authenticated cases on record in the Scriptures of truth. There is no doubt about it. The only uncertainty is as to where and when the operation takes place. In the vast mass of sublunary events, there is no Providence at all. They are the fortuitous concurrences of unconnected events, with which God has nothing to do in the direct, though veiled, form of causation involved in the term Providence. This also we have learnt on the same indubitable authority. The value of the lesson is found in the modesty it brings in our interpretation of the occurrences of common life, and in the yet helpful confidence that God, though unseen and in the darkness, will guide the steps of those who frame their purposes in His fear, and with a regard to His will.

But were there no other works of God than the ways of Providence, we should languish in our confidence. Those ways are often so dark, and so protracted in the time required for their full development, that without some tangible reason for trust, our hopes would sicken and our steps falter before the end of the matter was reached. We require the visible hand to give us faith in the invisible. God does not ask us to trust the one without showing us the other. It is the visible hand of God in the past that has laid the foundation of faith in the invisible one in the present. It is what God has openly, visibly, manifestly, undoubtedly done in the beginnings of things, that furnishes the ground for the wholesome belief in His present and continued operation in a way not manifest, but necessary, for the guidance of affairs to their appointed issue in that morning of brightness and peace which is to succeed the present night of darkness and confusion.

There is a constant appeal of this sort in the Scriptures. Throughout their entire course, there is a recognition of the reasonable view that the obligation to obey an invisible God arises out of the fact that He has made Himself visible in His acts before calling upon us to submit to Him. Let two illustrations of this suffice. Moses, in pressing home upon Israel the duty of obedience, said to them, “*Ye have seen* all that the Lord did *before your eyes* in the land of Egypt, unto Pharaoh and unto all his servants, and unto all his land; the great temptations which thine eyes have seen, the signs, and these great miracles”—([Deut. 29:2, 3](#)). Jesus, in speaking of the moral responsibilities of his rejectors said to his disciples, “If I had not done *among them* the WORKS WHICH NONE OTHER MAN DID, they had not had sin; but now have they both *seen* and hated both me and my Father” ([John 15:24](#)).

It is the facts in both these cases—Moses and Jesus—(and the number of similar cases and facts clustered around them)—that supply the foundation for faith. Faith is confidence for a reason. Everyone understands faith in this sense, as applied to ordinary matters. It is the same in divine matters. There is no truth in the popular view that places faith outside the confines of reason. Faith is a mental act; and, as a mental act, it is independent of and separate from the

nature of the thing acted on. If a man knows by experience that water gets hard with cold, his faith that the frozen lake will allow him to walk safely over is the result of a fact perceived—not understood. The ice has nothing to do with it, except as a fact seen. Faith is the same to whatever applied. In matters divine, popular view has confounded the act with the thing acted upon. Miracle may be outside the power of reason to understand, but this is no bar to the recognition of it (*i.e.*, faith in it) as a fact, if its reality as a fact is demonstrable in harmony with all the demands of the perceptive faculties. If we are to wait to comprehend the *modus in esse* before we believe anything, the circle of our belief would be narrowed to a microscopic point. We should refuse to believe that the sun shines, or the earth moves, or that flowers grow out of the ground, or, in fact, that we ourselves exist; for all these, and a million things besides, we only know as facts: the “How?” in the profoundest sense, we know not, and cannot know. We may talk of radiation and gravitation, and cellular development and biological force’ we but substitute other words, and shift the difficulty. Subdivide the phenomena as we will—analyse, dissect, decompose as exhaustively as the scientific appliances of modern times will admit, you only push the mystery a step further off. The “How?” waits you at the last stage. It is only the shallower minds that imagine knowledge complete. They mistake facts for their origin. Doubtless, to a cow in the farmyard, the turnips are their own sufficient and all-satisfactory explanation. There is a very wide application to Paul’s words, “If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know” ([1 Cor. 8:2](#)).

The facts of nature we receive because they are facts, and not because we understand them in the ultra-philosophic sense. So it is with miracles: the whole question is “are they facts?” not “are they comprehensible?” or “are they credible?” or “are they necessary?” or “can they serve a purpose?” A good deal of dust has been thrown in the public eye on this subject by the works of several accomplished writers, whose polished sentences and well-mannered dogmatisms have procured influence and consideration for badly-reasoned conclusions. David Hume and the writers of *Essays and Reviews* have a good deal to answer for on this head. By the influence of such writers, it has come to be a tradition in educated circles that miracles are impossible, and that if possible, they are useless. Even Canon Farrar, in his interesting *Life of Christ*, refers apologetically to the miracles recorded by the evangelists, with a remark to the effect that the cultured mind has come to regard them as unnecessary. How extraordinary that a professed public representative of Christ should pronounce those works of Christ unnecessary to which Christ himself appealed as a weightier evidence than his own personal claims! ([John 15:24](#); [5:36](#); [10:37–39](#); [Luke 7:20–22](#)). The sentiment that miracle is impossible, and useless if possible, or that it is in any way open to doubt, is one of the greatest barriers to the reception of the truth that exists in modern times; for the truth is nothing if miracle is taken away. It is founded on the miracle of Christ’s resurrection, and hangs on the anticipated miracle of our own resurrection.

The grounds on which the educated mind has come so easily to disbelieve in miracle are very slight, and really untenable. On the score of possibility, it is astonishing that any objection whatever should be felt. Granted, that to human power, miracle is impossible; but this no more disproves its possibility than it disproves nature. Could human power produce a star? No; yet there it is. Consequently, there is a power that is not human power. Will a sane man affirm that to this power a miracle is impossible? The denial is common, but then sanity is rare. What is a miracle? Take any of the miracles recorded in the Scriptures, and it will be found that there is not one of them but what, in some form or other, is being performed slowly before our eyes every day in the year. The miracle consists of doing quickly and by the direct employment of energy, that which is gradually and indirectly accomplished in nature. The multiplication of frogs, lice,

locusts, etc., in the afflictions of Egypt, for example, was not new, inasmuch as these creatures multiply each year. The marvel consisted in their instantaneous production. The production of bread by Christ to feed the thousands around him is an operation performed yearly on every corn-growing farm in the world. The turning of water into wine may be seen regularly done in France, and other countries, where the water-nourished grape yields the liquor that maketh glad the heart of man. Even the more apparent marvel of raising the dead has its counterpart. The raising of the dead is the making of a living being. Where were the living beings of the present moment a hundred years ago? They existed not. They have been made before our eyes, so to speak; slowly, and by orderly growth, it is true, but still made.

To deny the possibility of these things being done quickly which we see done slowly, is to be guilty of unphilosophical dogmatism. It is the most obvious dictate of common prudence to refrain from limiting the capabilities of a universe that is without measure in its extent, and without the possibility of being computed in the length of its antecedent periods. If we had no experience of miracles, the question of their possibility would, of course, be a matter of barren speculation; but it is evident that the question of their admissibility when they come before us as realities, cannot philosophically be prejudiced by any dogmatic assumption beforehand that they are impossible. Man, himself a product of the invisible energy that sustains all things, cannot surely be in a position to limit the possibilities of the power that has produced him.

The unbeliever here says that miracles are inconsistent with our experience, and opposed to the order of nature, and therefore incredible. This argument assumes two things that cannot be maintained:—1, That our experience is to be taken as the measure or standard of what is possible, and that whatever we have not experienced, in the sense of having witnessed, is to be rejected; and 2, That the passive order of nature as we see it is to be taken as the only phase in which nature has or ever can appear. The impossibility of maintaining these propositions will be evident from one or two very simple illustrations. There are stars and comets of remarkable beauty, seen in our heavens only once in a few centuries. Most of these have never been witnessed by the generation now living upon the earth. Shall we refuse to believe in them because we have never seen them? We should be bound to do so if the argument in question were a correct one. But no one acquainted with the subject of astronomy would dream of doubting them. Though the belief in their existence is founded on testimony merely, this belief, on the part of scientific men, amounts to absolute conviction. They believe the testimony because they know from their experience of human knowledge and the laws of testimony, that there is no other explanation to be given of the unanimous agreement of a number of separate and independent witnesses, who have no personal objects to serve than the truthfulness of that which they unanimously testify. A thousand other illustrations of this point will occur to the reflecting reader, showing that our own experience is by no means a certain guide in matters of fact; and that testimony is the most prolific source of all our knowledge. It is a question of the reliability of the testimony, and not the nature of the thing testified, though that will doubtless have some weight in the argument.

As to the argument on the passive order of nature: nature is doubtless passive as we see her; but how shall this be taken to prove that there does not dwell within her an Operator, who, when the objects of wisdom call for it can, and does, make Himself her active Master and Controller? We live too short a time to justify a negative conclusion on this subject. We are like the insects of the summer day, who do not live long enough to know the difference between night and day. A mouse at midnight among the benches of an empty orchestra, might just as reasonably conclude that there were no performers, as the philosopher that there is no Mighty Worker in the

universe, because he has not seen His hand. If the Mighty Worker were to show His presence in works as evidently impelled by intelligent volition as a philosopher's movements in his library, would not the philosopher then believe? Doubtless. Facts are his teachers; and one fact would be received as well as another. Suppose, however, though not permitted himself to witness such a supreme phenomenon, it is credibly testified to him by many others who have in past ages witnessed it, is he not bound to receive it? Unquestionably. He shows it by believing in the stars and comets he has never seen, and cannot see, unless he lives a thousand years. Here, again, it may be remarked, that the mere abstract possibility of such a thing would not be worth discussing, if the evidence of Divine operation and revelation were not one of the most palpable things in human history. The value of the considerations passed in review lies in showing that the present passiveness of nature cannot be philosophically treated as a barrier to the reception of the fact of Divine activity in nature, if such fact is credibly testified.

But it is said again—(and here perhaps is the argument that has weighed most with thinking minds)—that miracles cannot be useful, because in their nature they are inscrutable, and, therefore, cannot in true logic be so connected with that which we do not know as to prove anything. The maintainers of this argument contend that morals exist independently of miracle, and that miracle cannot impart increased obligation to duty, and that therefore in the nature of things, they cannot be mixed. The class with whom this sort of argument weighs, maintain that morality is more respectable without miracle than when supported by it, and that for their part, they would rather have the ethics of Greece without prodigy than the precepts of the Bible based on miracle.

The argument is plausible, but fundamentally fallacious. It assumes a theory on the subject of “morals” which cannot stand—a theory which embodies the gratuitous conception of ancient philosophic speculation which is not only not demonstrated, but upset both by modern research and the teaching of Scripture. The theory makes “right” and “wrong” a fixed quality or essence, and “conscience” the natural capacity of the mind to discern between one and the other. We had occasion in the consideration of the ways of Providence to discuss this point, and need not repeat. The theory is perfectly natural at the first stage of reflection on the subject. Men have looked at it in the light of their feelings. Experiencing a certain sort of “light within”, they have assumed that this is a sort of inseparable attribute of human mentality with corresponding fixed qualities of right and wrong in the constitution of things around. They ought to have extended their enquiries on the subject, and they would have discovered their conclusions to be out of harmony with the facts. They ought to have asked if all men possessed this moral discernment, and if in any man it existed independently of education. It would have been found that multitudes of men are devoid of the moral discernments that exercise educated persons, and that no man is born into the world with knowledge on any subject, but has to be carefully instructed, and that if he be not so instructed, either by direct tuition or by the example or talk of others, he will grow up a barbarian. Further investigation and reflection would have led to the discovery that right and wrong are relative ideas only, and that the only standard of their application is the revealed will of God. Those things are wrong which He forbids, and those things right which He commands. When men are ignorant of these, they are ignorant of right and wrong. Most men's knowledge on these points is but the diluted ideas that have filtered down society from originally divine sources, but which have become corrupted by admixture.

The application of these principles to the subject in hand lies here: if morality be the obedience of the commandments of God, how can morality exist without the conviction that the commandments proposed for obedience are the commandments of God? And how can this

conviction be produced apart from some evidence along with and outside the commandments themselves to show that God is the Author of them? And what could be evidence on this point short of miracle? Those who contend that miracle is no proof in the case, surely fail to apprehend the nature of miracle and its relation to Jehovah's claim on our obedience. The foundation of the claim is the assertion that He has made all things: that they are all His; and that He upholds them by His power. Now, is not this assertion proved by the exhibition of perfect control over the forces of heaven and earth? Who but the Upholder could instantaneously arrest the storm in its fury, as on the Sea of Galilee? or suddenly combine the elements going to constitute bread, as in the feeding of five thousand men with a few loaves? or in a moment alter the conditions causing disease, and so by a word healing all manner of sickness among the people? And who could thus control but the Upholder? And who could uphold but the Maker? And this is what it is necessary to prove before the foundation for obedience can be felt to exist.

The connection between miracle and morality, therefore, so far from being unnatural, is inseparable, when the nature of morality is apprehended. There cannot be true morality until the foundation for it is established by the demonstration of the divinity of the commandments set forth for obedience. And this demonstration requires miracle, for apart from miracle there could be no such demonstration. The objection to miracle, therefore, on the ground of its needlessness, is the weakest of all the weak objections that in modern days have shaken public confidence in the very basis of revelation. We have shown that miracles are necessary: that they are possible: that they are not inconsistent with the established order of nature. The only question remaining is, have they occurred? This is an affair of testimony. The testimony is abundant: it is specific; it is spread over a long period of the world's history; it is given by the best of mankind. The fact of its delivery and the result are seen in the existence of any little good there is to be found in the constitution of society as it is in the present day. The whole case, as a matter of testimony, is invulnerable; it is established beyond the possibility of logical overthrow. The sole reason for its non-reception by the wise of our day is their assumption beforehand, that the testimony is to a thing that is impossible. Their position in the matter is the extreme of logical absurdity.

It does not come within the scope of the work thus commenced to discuss the value of the testimony. That is a separate line of investigation. The present aim will be to rehearse the miraculous occurrences testified, with the object of illustrating the nature of them, and their necessity for the accomplishment of the ends in view.