

The Natural and The Supernatural

Introduction (1)

- This morning we were reminded that the created beings of the unseen spiritual world, subject to God's sovereign permissive will, can intrude into our world for good or ill
- Our focus this evening is not on this aspect of '*the natural and supernatural*' but rather on how God manifests his power in our world today:
 - In what ways do we experience God's supernatural power?
 - Should we expect miracles like those wrought by Jesus to be the ongoing pattern for the church? Or
 - Were such miracles confined to the days of Jesus and His Apostles?

Introduction (2)

- Such questions have divided Christians for centuries and remain a 'hot topic' in our day
 - At one extreme, we have the 'cessationists' who believe that the miracles accompanying Jesus's earthly ministry (along with the New Testament charismatic gifts) ceased when the Apostolic period came to an end
 - At the other extreme, we have the 'continuationists' who believe that miracles (particularly physical healing and even raising the dead) and charismatic gifts should be the normal experience of the church
 - In between, we have those who are 'non-cessationists' but far from embracing the position of the continuationists
 - We intend to tackle this matter in detail during our planned study of 1 Corinthians later this year
 - This evening I want to focus on the question: Is one of the key reasons for seeking 'the spectacular' (miracles) our lack of understanding of the what we call 'the natural'?
 - First a personal testimony

Understanding 'The Natural' (1)

- Is the desire for the 'spectacular' (e.g. signs and wonders) fuelled by a wrong/low view of 'the natural'?
- Is our view of 'the Natural' (Physical) Biblical or worldly?
- On a daily basis do we encounter the world around us and our experiences through the lens of God's Word?
- Do we really 'in the now' have an 'end of the book of Job' view of The Natural?
- Rather do we consign what we see around us to the ordinary and hanker after the extraordinary!
- It is a rather rare thing these days to hear Christians speak of the 'extraordinariness' of the 'natural' world
- This was not a problem for the Psalmists or the Apostle Paul:

Understanding 'The Natural' (2)

- **Colossians 1:16-17** For by him (the eternal Son of God) all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
- **Acts 17:24-28** "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'
- **Psalms 8:3-4** When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

Understanding 'The Natural' (3)

- **Ephesians 1:11** In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will
- **Psalms 138:8** The LORD will fulfil *his purpose* for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever-- do not abandon the works of your hands
- Let me quote John Woodhouse who concludes his very helpful paper entitled 'Where have all the miracles gone' with these words:
"It is not as though some events in this world are more an 'act of God' than others. Much that God does is what he usually does. We (misleadingly) call these things 'natural'. Sometimes God acts contrary to his usual ways. These things, of course, surprise us and amaze us. But we really should be amazed constantly at the one who is, at every moment, holding the whole of creation together"

Understanding 'The Natural' (4)

- More than 300 year before John Woodhouse penned these insightful and challenging words; John Flavel, one of the latter Puritans wrote a great and helpful book titled '*the mystery of providence*'.

Here are a just two of the chapter headings:

Our birth and our upbringing (applying Acts 17:26 '*he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live*'

The Work of Conversion (meditating on the complexities of times, places and people that, God's unseen but sovereign hand at work, used to bring us to hear and respond to His saving call)

- In reflecting on Psalm 138 '*the Lord will perfect that which concern me*' he concludes this:

"It is the duty of the saints, especially in times of straits (difficult times), to reflect upon the performances of Providence for them in all states and through all stages of their lives"

Understanding 'The Natural' (5)

- Long before this, a mature Abraham, who, at last has received his long awaited and promised son, is faced with 'such straits' with a words that, on the face of it, border on the absurd:

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." (Genesis 22:2)

- How do we account for his unquestioning and obedient response? The book of Hebrews helps us

Hebrews 11:19 "...Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead"

So when we read in Gen 22:5 "We will worship and then we will come back to you"-Abraham did not know 'the how' but he was (by faith in God's sure word) sure that it would be so! God is a promise keeping God!

*"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"
(Hebrews 11:1)*

We surely need to rediscover the God honouring and faith building discipline of meditating (part of which is reasoning!) on the reality of Divine providence 'in the now' of all our circumstances through the lens of his all sufficient Word (2 Tim 3:16-17)!

Discussion Questions

1. Why do we tend to think of the 'natural' as 'ordinary'?
2. How might current contemporary thought have influenced this?
3. What can we, as Christians, do to win back the high ground from people like David Attenborough on proclaiming the 'extraordinariness' of the 'ordinary'?
4. In a day when, more than ever, we are able to comprehend the bigness of the universe, why do you think God created it? (make a list of your ideas in the light of Psalm 8)
5. In praying for healing from an apparent incurable disease, is an outcome of healing over a period of time using 'human involvement' inferior to 'instantaneous' healing-if not, why not?
6. Is the addition of '*if it's your will* Lord' at the end of our prayer a sign of lack of faith?
7. When might it be such a sign (think about Ephesians 3:20)?
8. Should we pray for 'miraculous' healings?
9. How can we develop the habit of meditating on God's providence in our lives ('The Practise of the Presence of God' as Brother Lawrence, more than 300 years ago, referred to it)?
10. How might this fuel our prayers?
11. How might it help us have stronger ministries of encouragement?
12. How might it stir our witnessing?