

# Sample Sermon for Pastors' Use on Science and Faith (Special Christmas Focus on the Virgin Birth of Jesus)

by Tom Gilson

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For a one-page summary faith-science Practical Ministry Explainer article covering this material and more, with links to supporting documentation and additional reading, visit *The Stream's* page at [The 'Faith vs. Science' Challenge: A Practical Ministry Explainer for Pastors](#).

## The Message:

I spent a summer in China once, studying the Mandarin language (*Han yu*). Some of my American classmates were complaining about what a strange language it is. Which isn't false: A sentence like "Zhe lu qi che qu qian men ma?" sounds strange to American ears. If I got the tones right [in speaking, I can't easily put them in writing], that means, "Does this bus go to the train station?" It just sounds strange to English-speakers, though.

But then we got talking about our own language. We've got strange things, too, like "Guest host." "Jumbo shrimp." "Awfully good." The thing is, these things do make sense after all. There really is such a thing as a guest host; there's small shrimp and there's jumbo shrimp, we can say "awfully good" because everyone knows that "awfully" just means extra when we use it that way.

So let me try another couple of word pairs for you, and see if they make sense. The first one is "faith and science," and since it's the season, the second one is "virgin birth."

These two word pairs have something in common. There's a rumor out there, and I've sure you've heard it, that God and science don't mix. Faith and science can't coexist in the same world.

If science works, and if it's real, then the world we live in is a natural world, there's no God, no miracles, the Christian story is false, and faith is just fiction. And right at the top of that list of fictions, is our idea that Jesus was born of a virgin. Science knows that can't happen. And again, if science works, then the virgin birth of Jesus is just a myth, a sort of a fairy tale.

And that leaves us in a mess, if it's true, because we all know science works. The evidence is everywhere: In your pockets, in your medicine cabinet, in the car that brought you here or the device you're listening through. Science works. Can faith work, too, then?

That's the question we're going to talk about today. I'm going to cover it from four angles.

First, I'm going to open up this criticism, this charge against faith, and see what's inside it. We need to know what it's about, so when it's time to answer it, we know what it is we're answering.

Second, I'm going to answer the criticism. We're going to see that faith and science mix after all.

Third, for people who still think faith and science are at war with each other, I'm going to tell a few stories that I expect you'll find surprising. And encouraging. And actually fun, too.

## **The Problem They Find with Faith**

So here we go. Let's take a look at the charge: If science works, then faith is a fiction.

Here's the idea they have in mind. Science has revealed natural laws that govern the way the world works. No, not just the world, the whole universe.

There don't seem to be any exceptions to these laws, and it's hard to see how there even could be, they say. The universe is made up of matter and energy and forces. They're all related mathematically. We call their connections laws of nature, and these laws aren't like stop signs that you can roll through if you think you won't get caught.

No one decides whether to obey them. They don't tell us what to do if we want to, they describe what everything always does, period. Science has these laws wrapped up in mathematical language, and this math isn't squishy. It doesn't have any wiggle room in it. If it says  $\text{force} = \text{mass} \times \text{acceleration}$  (which was one of Newton's laws), and if you puafft the right units in there, you're going to get the same outcome a trillion times out of a trillion. Or a trillion times a trillion.

That's how the world works on the level that we can see. Quantum mechanics throws a slight monkey wrench into it, but not one that matters to us here. It says that when you get down to the atomic level or the sub-atomic, things can happen randomly. There's no law that says when a particular uranium atom is going to decay. It really does seem random. As I said, though, it doesn't matter. (And if the words "quantum mechanics" make your eyes glaze over, that's okay.) This is about randomness.

Randomness doesn't help us any. Jesus wasn't randomly born of a virgin.

So we're stuck, right? Science says we live in a world of unbreakable natural law. Faith says we don't. Now, look around you. Which side has the more powerful evidence going for it? Do we know science works? Do we know it for certain? Of course we do. How could faith stand up against that?

That's the charge they make. That's the problem we face. But there's a problem with this problem, which is that it gets a whole lot of things wrong. We've taken a gooks look at the charge they've raised against us. They think it's solid. I'm going to show you now that it's got some major holes in it.

## **The Problem With the Problem**

They say that science works, and science teaches us we live in a world of unbreakable natural law, so therefore miracles are impossible and faith is a fiction. It seems so logical. Let me share a secret with you, though. I don't mind if you spread it to the whole world. The secret is this: The people who say that are more clueless than they know. They don't know what they're talking about, and believe it or not, they don't really understand the science they're talking about.

### **They don't know the faith they're talking about**

So their first problem is, they don't know the faith they're talking about.

Here's my favorite example of that. It comes from a brilliantly famous mathematician-biologist named J. B. S. Haldane. This was decades ago, in the 1930s, but it's got a timeless sort of feel to it. It got revived recently by another atheist scientist named Lawrence Krauss, anyway. Haldane said,

My practice as a scientist is atheistic. That is to say, when I set up an experiment I assume that no god, angel or devil is going to interfere with its course; and this assumption has been justified by such success as I have achieved in my professional career. I should therefore be intellectually dishonest if I were not also atheistic in the affairs of the world.

Does that sound like a solid argument? I suppose you could say it is. Haldane doesn't believe in a god who'd interfere with his experiments. Guess what? Neither do we!

Yes, we believe in a God who does miracles. But miracles are rare. That's the whole point of them! What good would a miracle be if everyone saw them happen every day? God uses miracles to get a message through to us. Jesus healed people to show His unique kingship, His unique power, and His unique love. In order to get that message across, what did it have to be? It had to be unique. It had to be rare.

His virgin birth was unique, obviously. It had to be, because God only entered the world in human form once. Now, the fact that it happened once - that doesn't change what science tells us about where babies come from, does it?

Just think of a world like Haldane imagines, where gods, angels, or demons

“interfere” in the laboratory. It wouldn’t just be in the lab, it’d be everywhere. We’re talking chaos, a totally unlivable world. One night you’re making your eight-year-old eat his Brussels sprouts because they’re good for him, the next night they’re poisonous and he dies. In a world like that you could never learn what was good for you. You couldn’t learn what the word “good” even means. Even if you survived your own Brussels sprouts. And what about the way you killed your child? Did you do anything wrong? Would you be responsible? Could you have any moral responsibility for anything you did?

These are just some quick questions that pop into mind when I start thinking about the kind of God Haldane is disproving. He’s disproved a ridiculous fake god no one believes in! Our God created us in His image so we could grow and learn in this world. So we could build things. So we could do right and wrong. So that we’d be morally responsible for the wrong things we do. This is the God we believe in: A God who made the world to be very, very, very predictable, so that we could live in it and be responsible for what we do here.

Haldane’s comment about gods, angels, or demons makes a very strong case against a god no one believes in. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the God of Christianity. Our God doesn’t quote-unquote “interfere” or do anything at all randomly or chaotically. When he does miracles, he does them meaningfully.

And for meaningful miracles, the virgin birth is right at the top of the list. It’s one of the big three, in my opinion: Creation, Jesus’ virgin birth, and his resurrection. One child’s virgin birth has not done anything to hinder the science of reproduction. But look what it has done for us; look at how meaningful it is!

Just think of what it means: God with us! It changed everything. It changed our view of God. It changed our access to God – we never could have come into relationship with God without the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God in the flesh, walking with us, teaching us, showing us his example of the one perfect life ever lived by a man, and saving us at the cross and the empty tomb.

## **Transition**

So that’s the first problem people have when they say faith and science don’t mix. They don’t know what our faith is all about. They’re denying a false god no one else affirms anyway. Sometimes, when atheists press hard on this issue, I’ve asked them why they do it. I’ll even ask them, “What’s the point of it? Where’s the entertainment value in it?”

But that’s only the first problem. It’s bad enough they don’t understand the faith they’re criticizing. They really don’t understand the science side, either.

## **They don’t know the science they’re talking about**

You’d think that as much as they love science, they’d take care to understand it. I mean really understand it. No such luck, in this case. They’ve got science wrong.

They’ve got it wrong in a lot of ways, and I’ve only got time to talk about one of them.

They think that because science explains a lot of things, it explains everything. They forget what science is: It's the study of nature. Things that happen by natural cause and effect. That's what it does, and it does it very well. Does that mean it does everything? Of course not!

A bit of a news flash here: God is not part of nature. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." He created it and he rules over it, as he rules over all reality, physical or spiritual. He is supreme over all, and nothing in his creation can resist him.

There's a sense in which nature seems to know this. Psalm 96:11-13 speaks of the world exulting at the Lord's reign: "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes ... to judge the earth ... in righteousness and ... faithfulness."

At Jesus' Triumphal Entry he told the Pharisees if the crowd were silent, "the very stones would cry out" (Luke 19:40). We know that this is all speaking in figures of speech, but it speaks a principle that's clear in Scripture, from the first page to the last. God rules over nature.

Some foolish people will still object. They'll say, "The laws of nature are firm. Miracles mean new energy entering into the world from nowhere, and we know that's impossible. Energy can't be created and it can't be destroyed."

I said that was foolish, and I meant it. This person is saying there's no God because he knows everything about both God and nature. He knows for certain nature is everything, the laws of nature are higher than any God who might have created them.

We've already said it: Science runs on the laws of nature being predictable. There's a law that says energy is never created. From inside nature. The law doesn't know anything about what's not inside nature. It doesn't know a thing about God. And science doesn't have any way of saying this law is the highest law of all laws.

The person who says nature's laws are necessarily higher than God's laws is speaking from foolish pride.

God is king over nature. The birth of Christ meant the King was entering his domain in a new way. And his domain had neither the power nor the desire to stop him.

## **Transition**

So let's review here. We're coming up on Christmas, when we celebrate the virgin birth of Jesus. There are atheists among us who say that's impossible because faith is opposed to science; that if science is real, faith can't be, and if faith is real, science couldn't be.

What we've seen is how this charge misunderstands both faith and science. It gets faith wrong in all kinds of ways. We only had time to look at one: the one that says that if there's a God who does miracles, then science isn't going to work. But in our example, we saw a scientist saying this who had a totally mixed-up view of faith. He

succeeded in disproving a god no one believes in. He didn't succeed in disproving the God of the Bible.

Then we talked about how people misunderstand science when they make this charge. They think that because science explains a lot of things really well, therefore it explains everything. They forget that science is the study of nature. They forget that Christianity means there is a King who rules over all nature.

I have one final point to make. It's about this whole business of faith being against science. I wish I had time to tell you the whole story. I can only give you a taste of it, maybe to whet your appetite to learn more of the story, or maybe just to let you know there's a whole lot more mythology and false fables in this science vs. faith thing.

## **Science-Faith Fables**

Some say the virgin birth must be a fable. Let me tell you about something that really is. I mean, absolutely certainly for sure false. I can't go all the way into it, but even a touch of it, I think will give you perspective on this whole science-faith thing like you've never had before.

You know the story, don't you, of how the Church resisted science back in the early years? You've heard how science had to push mightily through the Church's ignorance, to light the light of knowledge?

You've been fed a lie. It's a powerful lie. It's a lie almost everybody believes. You know who doesn't believe it? Historians. People who actually study this stuff. You ask them, and you know what they'll tell you? They'll tell you that you've been fed a lie.

The lie came from somewhere. It didn't just grow up out of nowhere. Back in the 1860s a man named Andrew Dickson White was the first president of Cornell University. He said he wanted it to be a secular college. Christian neighbors in and around Cornell's campus in Ithaca, New York, got upset with him over it.

The fight heated up. He shot back with his best weapon: A book. He called it "The History of the Warfare of Science With Theology in Christendom." He sold it as "history." He sold it as the story of "warfare" between science and theology. He sold a lie.

I'm serious. You can check this out almost anywhere. You can even look it up on Wikipedia, because even they get it mostly right. White wasn't the only one; there was another author with another book like it; his name was John William Draper. But it was White's reputation as a university president that helped sell the lie. It was the many, many footnotes he put in it, many of which he made up. It looked good. It looked intellectual. It was a lie.

And people bought the lie. All over Europe, all over America. The fact is, all the early scientists were Christians. The Church supported them. You may have learned otherwise, but again, point by point, story by story, scientist by supposedly persecuted scientist, what you learned is a lie.

There's so much more I could say, but I need to come to a close. Here's what I

want you to take away from all this. Some people say that science disproves faith. They don't understand what our faith is about, and they don't really understand what science is about. They don't understand that the God who made nature is still King over nature. That's a lot of misunderstanding there already, isn't it? And yet they're so proud of themselves for it.

So the next time someone tells you the Virgin Birth is just a fable, ask them whether they think the Church resisted science, in the early years of science. Look it up on Wikipedia together. (Don't worry, Wikipedia is just fine in this case.) Then ask them who's really believing a fable.

But do it gently. They may not understand the whole truth, how the King of all creation broke into that creation as a human being, that first Christmas morning 2,000 years ago.

It's quite a contrast to the skeptics' pride, but don't let it become an occasion for you to puff your pride. The King who entered His creation didn't let so-called science get in His way. He didn't let pride get in His way, either. "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

The skeptics may have their skepticism. Let them. You need not cower before them, not even before supposedly almighty science. God is the almighty. Be encouraged.

(Thank you to my friend Pastor Brad Mitchell of [The River Church](#) near Cincinnati for the opening illustration about oxymorons!)

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