

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Bible and Miracles: What is a miracle?

Is it a miracle when we pray for God to meet a financial need and the postman brings a cheque on precisely the day the money is needed? Is it a miracle when a parking space opens up near the entrance right when you need one? Is it a miracle when a mother senses something is wrong in an adjoining room and investigates just in time to stop her toddler from poking a paper clip into the electrical outlet? Is it a miracle when something prompts a young woman to think of a friend she has not seen for a long time, and she phones to discover that she has called at just the moment her friend needed encouragement?

We often call such events 'miracles', but they are more properly termed 'acts of providence' (in other words, that God is supernatural, and has sovereign control over ALL natural events so that His plans and purposes are achieved). They reveal God's working in our daily lives and often come as answers to prayer, but they are not the kind of supernatural signs and wonders Scripture classifies as miracles.

A miracle is an extraordinary event wrought by God through human agency, an event that cannot be explained by natural forces. Miracles always are designed to authenticate the human instrument God has chosen to declare a specific revelation to those who witness the miracle. A miracle is an event in nature, so extra-ordinary in itself and so coinciding with the prophecy or command of a religious teacher or leader, as fully to warrant the conviction, on the part of those who witness it, that God has wrought it with the design of certifying that this teacher or leader has been commissioned by Him.

Miracles involve supernatural, superhuman forces specifically associated with God's messengers and are not merely strange happenings, coincidences, sensational events, or (natural) abnormalities. They are by definition a sub-category of the supernatural.

There are miracles performed by God such as: Creation, the Flood, natural wonders, and cataclysms, for they show God clearly at work supernaturally interceding in human affairs, judging rebellious people, and blessing those who are faithful. Miracles were also performed by our Lord Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, by Angels, by servants of God and even evil agents.

People today are obsessed with the supernatural, to the point that they are willing to interpret almost any odd phenomenon as a supernatural wonder. More and more we hear about bizarre and unusual events that are popularly misinterpreted as miracles. Eager to witness miracles, many people seem willing to believe that almost anything unusual is a genuine heavenly wonder. That poses a tremendous danger for the church, because Scripture tells us that false miracles - extremely believable ones - will be a primary tool of Satan in the end times (Matthew 24:24-25).

GOD'S REASONS FOR WORKING MIRACLES

God's reasons for doing His mighty works, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament are that He had lessons to impart which could not otherwise be taught. He had purposes to fulfil which could not otherwise be accomplished. He had revelations to make which could not otherwise be made clear. Sometimes He worked to prove His omnipotence, His omniscience, His omnipresence; at other times He wished to reveal that He Himself was working.

The three words used in the New Testament for miracles suggest some of the chief purposes for which they were wrought. They are called:

- **SIGNS:** to teach some lesson (this word 'sign' is found throughout the Gospel of John). (Greek: *semeion*).
- **WONDERS:** the effect is the prominent thought. (Greek: *terata*).
- **MIGHTY DEEDS:** attention is drawn to the cause which produces the miracle (Greek: *dunamis*).

In all the following passages three words are used. Though in different order:

- Acts 2:22 “miracles, wonders, signs”,
- 2 Corinthians 12:12 “signs, wonders, mighty deeds”,
- 2 Thessalonians 2:9 “power, signs, lying wonders”.

See also Exodus 7:3; Deuteronomy 6:22; 34:11; Nehemiah 9:10; Psalm 135:9; Jeremiah 32:21; Daniel 6:27; Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; John 4:48; Acts 2:43; Romans 15:19; 2 Corinthians 12:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; and Hebrews 2:4.

SATAN IS ALLOWED TO DO MIRACLES

Satan is allowed to have power over the bodies of men, and so he can doubtless produce cure as well as sickness. Tertullian, who lived in AD 160-225. Born in Carthage, north Africa, a so-called ‘church father’, wrote concerning the sorcerers of his day: “They first cause the injury, and then, in order to make it seem like a miracle, prescribe remedies which are either new, or absolutely opposed to the ordinary methods of treatment; after which they stop causing the injury, and are believed to have affected a cure”.

While on the one hand there is an increased desire to get rid of the miracles of the Bible, there is on the other hand an even stronger yearning on all hands to pierce the veil of the unseen, and to hold communication with spirits. Let me add this also: The occult sciences seem more and more to attract men and women, but the word of God is very plain with respect to them. In Deuteronomy 18:10-11 there are seven or eight different words used for evil customs which were and are an abomination to the Lord, and were absolutely forbidden. The children of Israel were not to use divination, nor consult an observer of times, an enchanter, a witch or wizard, a charmer, a consulter with familiar spirits, a necromancer (one who inquires of the dead).

Jesus said: “False christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect”. Then He added, as if knowing that many would ignore the warning: “Behold, I have told you in advance” (Matthew 24:24-25).

Surely in light of those words from our Lord Jesus, some healthy scepticism on the part of Christians is warranted. Paul tells us that the Antichrist will work miracles, but they will be counterfeit credentials: “even him whose coming is after the working of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders” (2 Thessalonians 2:9).

WHAT ABOUT MODERN MIRACLES?

God is always operating on a supernatural level. God intervenes supernaturally in nature and in human affairs even today. God can heal people apart from natural or medical remedies. All things are possible with God (Matthew 19:26). His power is still the same as it was since the days of the early church. Salvation of souls is always a supernatural act of God.

Most ‘modern’ miracles are nearly always partial, gradual, or temporary. The only ‘instant’ miracles are healings that seem to involve forms of psychosomatic diseases. People with visible disabilities are rarely if ever helped at all by modern so-called faith-healers.

WHEN DID GOD USE MIRACLES - AND WHY?

Most biblical miracles happened in three relatively brief periods of Bible history. There is a definite ‘distribution’ of miracles discernible in Scripture. We have miracles recorded in the days of Moses and Joshua at the establishment of the Jewish nation. We have miracles recorded during the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the struggle with idolatry. At the introduction of Christianity we have many miracles: the virgin birth of Jesus Christ was the initial miracle of the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles were the miracle workers.

Notice that none of these periods lasted much more than a hundred years. Each of them saw a proliferation of miracles unheard of in the other eras. And what we must further remember is that even during those first three time periods, miracles were not exactly the order of the day. The miracles that then happened involved men who were extraordinary messengers from God Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and the apostles. There are isolated ‘supernatural’ events in the days of Isaiah and Daniel.

We must remember that world-wide cataclysms, spectacles in the heavens, and apocalyptic events are not the same as apostolic miracles. We cannot therefore enlist every supernatural act of God as a support for an ongoing apostolic ministry of miracles. God can, of course, interject Himself into the stream of history supernaturally anytime He wishes, but He chose to limit Himself primarily to three periods of biblical miracles, with very rare supernatural displays in between. The rest of the time God works through providence.

MIRACLES INTRODUCED NEW ERAS OF REVELATION

Let us remember Moses who wrote the first five books of Scripture. Let us think of Elijah and Elisha who introduced the prophetic age of the Major and Minor Prophets. And lastly, let us remember the apostles who wrote nearly all of the New Testament. All these servants of the Lord had a ministry of miracles.

MIRACLES AUTHENTICATED THE MESSENGERS OF REVELATION

All the miracles served an important purpose. They were not simply divine 'exhibitionism'; they substantiated and authenticated the prophets' claim that they spoke for God. Moses' miracles confirmed first to Pharaoh, and then to the Israelites, that Moses spoke for God. Jesus' miracles served this purpose; they authenticated Him and His message (Acts 2:22).

The church in the Acts was not so much a 'wonder-working-church', but rather it would be more accurate to speak of a church with wonder-working apostles. In Acts 2:43 we read: "Every one was filled with awe," and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles" (see also Acts 5:12; 15:12; 2 Corinthians 12:12).

God used miracles to get the attention of the people to whom the message was directed as that they would know for sure it was the divine Lord Who was speaking. Thus miracles have an instructive purpose that goes beyond the immediate effect of the miracle itself. The miracles Moses did in Egypt were meant to enlighten two groups of people: Israelites and Egyptians. The miracles of Elijah and Elisha were effective in convincing both believers and unbelievers that what those men spoke was the word of God. In the New Testament miracles and signs were again used to confirm believers and convince unbelievers (see John 20:31). We now come to the following important question:

ARE MIRACLES NECESSARY TODAY?

When the Old Testament and the New Testament were complete, God's revelation was finished (Hebrews 1:12). Through many signs, wonders, and miracles God authenticated His book. Is there then an ongoing need for miracles to substantiate God's revelation? We believe that Scripture does not indicate that the miracles of the apostolic age were meant to be continuous in subsequent ages. Nor does the Bible exhort believers to seek any miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit. There is no command in the New Testament to seek miracles. We believe that tongues, healings and miracles all served as signs to authenticate an era of new revelation. Our next question is:

DOES GOD PROMISE MIRACLES FOR EVERYONE?

Are Christians supposed to seek their own private miracles? None of Jesus' miracles were done in private! He did miracles to authenticate His messianic claims (John 20:30 and 31). If doing miracles had been the common experience of ordinary Christians, it would be foolish for the apostle Paul to try to prove his apostleship by citing the miracles he had done: "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Corinthians 12:12). From this it is evident and obvious that even during the apostolic age Christians could not do signs, wonders and miracles. Precisely because those things were unique to the apostles. Paul could use his experience with signs and wonders as a proof of his authority. Scripture repeatedly makes it clear that the APOSTLES were unique!

At Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, who was 'full of good works and alms deeds, fell sick and died. None of the local believers was able to bring her back to life again. They sent for the apostle Peter who was at that moment visiting Lydda and ask him to come quickly. Because Peter was an apostle it was he who was able, through the Lord's enabling to raise Tabitha from among the dead (Acts 9:36-41).

HAS GOD'S POWER DIMINISHED?

Has God's power then diminished? In Acts 5:16, early in the apostolic age when the church was just getting started, we read that multitudes were being healed by the apostles. Twenty-five years later Paul, the greatest of all apostles, could not be delivered from his own troublesome 'thorn' (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Though he at one time seems to have had the ability to heal others at will (Acts 28:8), as Paul neared the end of his life he showed no evidence of such a gift! He advised Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake, and he left a beloved brother sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). He surely would have healed him if he could!

Right at the beginning of the book of Acts Jerusalem was filled with miracles, yet after the martyrdom of Stephen, no more miracles were recorded in that city. Something was changing. We should remember that the miracles of the apostolic age were not to be the pattern for succeeding generations of Christians. We today have no mandate to seek or perform miracles. But we do have a mandate to study and obey God's word, which is able to make us wise and

mature: And we do have a mandate to live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). In John 14:12 we read this promise from our Lord Jesus Christ: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father". To listen to some contemporary advocates of signs-and wonders ministry you would think this promise bypassed the apostolic age and is being fulfilled in their meetings.

"Greater works" does not mean more spectacular miracles; nothing in the context of John 14 speaks of supernatural signs and wonders.

What is a greater work than raising the dead? John 5:20-21 indicates it is the giving of spiritual life to sinners. Of course, the apostles' works were greater in scope, not in quality, than those of the Lord Jesus. They took the Gospel to the ends of the known world in their day. But much of that was accomplished after miracles had begun to pass from the scene. Has God lost His power to do miracles today? All around us we see evidence of God's marvellous work: in the transforming new birth in the lives of millions around the world who trust the Lord Jesus Christ. We see it in daily answers to prayer; in the providential matching of people and resources to bring glory to Himself; in the resilience of His church, which has survived ruthless persecutions and various internal assaults through the centuries and continues to do so today.

"The greatest miracle of all is the salvation of countless millions of lost souls since the early church. We believe that God has not placed spokesmen (like the early-church apostles) with miracle-working power in the church today. Why would God authenticate bad theology? Why would He give miraculous power to people who teach heresy? Yet every movement today that highlights miracles as a central theme is tainted with shoddy theology, with confused and inconsistent doctrine, outright heresy, or a combination of these" (John MacArthur).

THE DENIAL OF MIRACLES

If we deny God the power to perform miracles, then He is no longer a God of freedom, a living God, above nature and independent of nature. Bible miracles form an integral part of Holy Writ and testify to its divine inspiration and veracity. Without its miraculous contents we could not accept the Bible as a supernatural book. Bible miracles are by divine design to confirm the divine nature of Christianity and are evidences of the authority of the Gospel (see Mark 16:2; Hebrews 2:4).

The fatal weakness of a religious leader like Mahomet, and one of which he was acutely conscious, was that he could show no miracles attesting the divinity of his mission. Christianity and Christendom can only be explained by accepting the miracles which introduced them. Miracles are parables of grace, and miracles of power. Miracles, then, have a twofold value: a physical and a spiritual.

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