

“IT’S A MIRACLE! OR IS IT?”

To hear folks talk, you would think that miracles are a common thing today. It seems like anything that appears extraordinary or incredibly impressive could qualify as a miracle sent from God. Businesses even capitalize on the word by marketing products like “Miracle Whip” and “Miracle Grow”. They, of course, mean that their product surpasses the ordinary run-of-the-mill product and is able to do something amazing. But I would like to suggest that we’re blowing things a bit out of proportion today. We’ve lost sight of what a miracle really is. A lot of things are called miracles today that just simply aren’t miracles.

I want to invite your attention to **Mark 16:14-20**, where the scriptures say:

“Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.”

There is no question among Bible believers, that many of the early Christians were able to perform miracles. But what made them miracles and do they still occur today? Let’s consider the following three questions or propositions about miracles: Their power, their purpose, and their presence.

I. THE POWER OF MIRACLES

Have you ever seen a miracle take place? If so, what made you believe it was a miracle? What definition would you give for the word miracle? Perhaps you would say a miracle is a divine act or a working of God. Maybe it is anything you believe the hand of God to be involved in. Well, let’s think about that. The hand of God is really involved in just about everything, either originally or directly. God, of course, created all things, and those things continue to exist because God wills it so. Nature is governed by a set of laws that God put in place when He created the world, so, when we behold the beauty and wonder of nature we are, in a sense, seeing the hand of God at work.

A beautiful tree or flower is a fascinating thing to behold. It is nothing short of amazing to watch them become bare and dormant in the winter and suddenly come back to life in the spring aflame with vibrant and thrilling colors. Likewise, the birth of a child is an incredible process. I don’t suppose there is

a feeling like holding your newborn baby in your arms for the first time. To watch that baby grow and mature is a thrilling experience.

Both of those things are acts of God. The natural laws which allow them to take place must be the result of a divine power. However, neither one is a miracle. People talk about the miracle of childbirth, but childbirth is not a miracle. It is a truly amazing thing, but it's not a miracle. If you look the word "miracle" up in Webster's Dictionary, it means "an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs or an extremely outstanding unusual event, thing or accomplishment." That sounds like a plausible definition, doesn't it? But the problem is, Webster defines words according to their most modern usage and that doesn't do us a lot of good when we're studying a word used thousands of years ago. Today, the word has come to mean anything that is amazing or extremely unusual but that is not what it means in the scriptures. The New Testament was written in Greek some two thousand years ago. The word Bible writers used that we translate as "miracle" is a Greek word that means "with uncertain affinity, to be able or possible." More simply put, it means something that can't be explained by natural laws. Now the birth of a child is a wonderful and thrilling thing and we marvel when we see it occur, but everything about it can be explained by natural law. The colorful petals of a rose are beautiful to behold, and to see a flower grow and bloom is amazing, but it is not a miracle. There is a natural law that causes it to take place. Medical science is not a miracle. It may be aided by God's providence, but the techniques of medicine are based on the laws of science and biology. It is not necessarily a miracle when a sick person gets better. The hand of God may providentially be involved, but it is not a miracle.

When we look closely at the miracles that are recorded in the Bible, we see a big difference between them and the things that people today claim to be miracles. Consider the miracles of Jesus.

-In **John 2**, Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee when He changed water into wine. Now, that was undoubtedly a miracle. There is not a single law of nature that would allow plain water to suddenly turn into wine. Christ set the laws of the universe aside when that took place.

-According to **John 5**, Jesus healed a man at the Pool of Bethesda who had been widely known as an invalid for 38 years. He did not undergo an operation or intensive therapy but rather Jesus healed him instantly and all who witnessed it would know beyond the shadow of a doubt that a miracle had taken place.

-In **John 6**, we read where Jesus fed a throng of 5,000 hungry people with nothing but five loaves of bread and two small fish. Now, I've been to some wonderful Sunday "dinner on the grounds" over the years and I've never seen the good sisters run out of food no matter how large the crowd. But that's not a miracle. What Jesus did, on the other hand, defies any explanation.

One time Jesus immediately brought sight to the eyes of a man who had been blind all of his life. A few years ago, I had a surgery that allowed me to see clearly. I was dependant on glasses for most of my life and could hardly see my hand in front of my face. Within a few minutes, though, a small laser reshaped my eye and gave me 20/20 vision. I could hardly believe it when I sat up a few minutes after the surgery

and could read the clock on the wall, from all the way across the room. That's amazing, but it wasn't a miracle. What Jesus did defied medical or scientific explanation.

When Jesus spoke to the boisterous winds and waves of Lake Galilee and caused them to be still, that was a miracle. Just as it was the time He came to His disciples in their boat walking on the top of the water. But one of the greatest and most impressive of all miracles is the resurrection of the dead. Jesus' friend, Lazarus, died and his loved ones went to find the Lord. They said if He had been there when Lazarus was sick, he wouldn't have died. But Jesus performed a much more impressive miracle than making a sick man well. Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus *four days after he had died*. His body had already begun to decompose. But Jesus went to the tomb and called out his name. That corpse wrapped in its grave clothes came walking out of the tomb. Lazarus was ALIVE! Now, preachers who claim the power to work miracles today should be able to do what Jesus did. Jesus brought that body back to life-- not as it lay upon an operating table. It wasn't as if Lazarus' heart had just stopped beating and Jesus resuscitated him. Lazarus had been dead for days and his family couldn't imagine seeing him alive again, but Jesus raised him up.

These are examples of miracles. They are manifestations of divine power that set the laws of nature aside and defy any natural explanation. And consequently, if I can believe in an omnipotent God, I can believe in the miracles of the Bible. I do believe those things took place, despite modernists and liberals who try to explain them away and discredit them by science. They can't be explained by science because that's what a miracle is. It is something that takes place by circumventing natural law. The claims of supposed 'miracle workers' today don't match that definition. They claim to heal the sick, but their healing campaigns are always surrounded by a cloud of suspicion and many of them have been exposed through the years for using slight-of-hand techniques, or by picking people out of the crowd to heal who really weren't that sick. There is also a vast difference between a Christian praying for a person who is ill, and that person recovering in the course of time, and on the other hand, a miracle like what occurred in the Bible. Those events were instant and undeniable.

Speaking in tongues was a miracle that defied explanation. A tongue is another language that the speaker has never studied. Now, I am not bilingual. About all I can do is barely navigate the menu at the local Mexican restaurant. And so anyone who knows me knows that it would be impossible for me to start preaching in a foreign language. I have never studied those languages. I spent several weeks preaching in the Philippines a few years ago and everywhere I went, a translator had to translate my sermon from English to the particular dialect of the Pilipino language that was spoken in that area. In the early church, some had the power to speak in foreign languages they had never studied. That's exactly what happened in **Acts 2** on the day of Pentecost when Peter and the other apostles started speaking in tongues. There were Jews in Jerusalem that day, having come from every nation, and it took a miracle for the apostles to be able to communicate the gospel to them in a way that men of every tongue and nation could hear and understand. Speaking in tongues is not this gibberish you hear charismatic people rattling off today that can't be understood. It is the ability to speak in languages that are known to others but not the speaker. So, the claims of modern miracle workers aren't even in harmony with the Bible definition of miracles.

II. THE PURPOSE OF MIRACLES

If we can answer that question, it will help us learn whether or not miracles still happen today. First, I want to say that no one in the Bible ever performed a miracle to be sensational or to make money. The modern claims of so-called miracle workers make for a pretty lucrative business today. Some of these TV preachers are getting rich and famous off of their claims to be able to heal the sick and miraculously bring you prosperity. Jesus didn't solicit money from people in exchange for some kind of miracle. He didn't go around peddling prayer cloths, miracle water or anointing oil. The only thing these modern preachers are selling is snake oil and they ought to be ashamed of themselves for duping ignorant and vulnerable people like they do for their money and their trust.

Second, the purpose of miracles was not merely to show compassion. Now, Jesus certainly pitied those who suffered. His heart broke for those who were sick and downtrodden. But that wasn't the real motivation for His miracles. If it were, then why wouldn't He miraculously heal every person who is sick or disabled? After, Jesus loves all men and is no respecter of persons. The purpose of the miracles that are recorded in the Bible is this: to prove that something had been spoken or revealed by God.

Miracles have always been solely for the purpose of divine confirmation.

Exodus 3 and 4: Moses was empowered to perform miracles to establish his authority over the Hebrew people and with the Egyptians.

I Kings 18: Elijah performed miracles to establish his authority as the prophet of the true God with Ahab and Jezebel and the people of Israel at Mt. Carmel.

Matthew 11:1-6 When John the Baptist was in prison about to be beheaded, he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was really the Son of God. Jesus pointed to His miracles to prove that He was.

John 2: 11 "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

John 11:15 Regarding the death of Lazarus, Jesus said, "And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him." In other words, He allowed Lazarus to die to provide Him with the opportunity to work a great miracle to prove that He was the Son of God.

John 21:25 "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen."

Now then, Jesus not only performed miracles to prove His own deity, but He imparted the power to work miracles to his apostles, as well as some within the early church, to prove that the word that was being spoken by them was being provided to them by the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 2:3-4 “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?”

Now it's an extraordinary thing for a man to claim that God has spoken to him. A claim such as that would need some kind of corroborating evidence, wouldn't it? As goes the claim, so must go the demonstration. The apostles needed credentials to prove that they were vested with the authority of Christ and were speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit because it's not enough for anybody to just make such a claim. Well, miracles or gifts of the Holy Spirit served as those credentials. Let's look again at our text.

Mark 16:14-20 “Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.”

Notice that the disciples were guilty of not believing the reports of Christ's resurrection. Jesus rebukes them for their unbelief and then commissions them to go to the entire world and testify to them about the fact that Jesus was the risen Christ. They were to preach the good news of salvation to every person they met and Jesus says *signs* would follow those who believe. Who is He talking about when he says “*those who believe?*” Remember, these same disciples who were to go and tell others about the Lord were slow to believe the message they were told to go and preach. Jesus is promising the apostles the powerful credentials they would need to convince men that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and preaching the truth. The Holy Spirit would bear witness within them of the fact that they were speaking the words of God, by allowing them to perform miracles. As the early church received the revelation of the New Testament, those miracles and spiritual gifts were an important part of that process. They showed that the message they were receiving was truly the will of God.

III. THE PRESENCE OF MIRACLES

Do people have the same power to perform miracles today? Is God still causing miracles to occur in our world in this present day? Well, I can tell you one thing: the apostle Paul said that spiritual gifts would not last forever.

I Corinthians 13:8- “Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

Note that Paul said prophecy, tongues and knowledge would all pass away. (A look at the surrounding context of chapters 12 and 14, shows that Paul was talking about supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit here.) He is talking about miracles. They would not always be given to the church. So, when would they pass away? Well, Paul said those gifts were “*in part*.” That means that they were insufficient, and represented a time when the final revelation of God’s will was incomplete. The earliest Christians did not have the complete and canonized New Testament as we do today. They were receiving the truth over the course of time. It was a cumulative process and during the time of that process, Paul could say they only knew in part and prophesied in part. But notice that Paul says in verse 10 that when that which is perfect (and that word doesn’t mean sinless or without blemish-- it means complete) when that which is perfect or complete has come, then that which is in part shall be done away with. Some say that this refers to the second coming of Jesus Christ because He is sinless and perfect. Well, besides that not being what perfect means here, Christ is not a “*that*,” He is a *person*. The text says “*when THAT which is perfect is come...*” Paul is referring to the completed revelation of Christ or the finished New Testament; or as Jude would refer to it, “*the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*” (**Jude 3**).

Paul then illustrates what he means by saying when he was a child he talked like a child and understood and thought like a child but when he reached manhood, he put childish things away. He simply means that the church was in a state of infancy at that time, and was in the process of maturing in its knowledge of Christ, as the Holy Spirit was making that information known. Once the gospel was fully revealed, the things pertaining to the infancy and development of the church could be put in the past. When you build a building you put up scaffolding to aid in the building process. When the building is finished, you don’t leave the scaffolding set up, you take it away because it has served its purpose. When the New Testament was completed, miracles had served their purpose of confirming that the gospel message was indeed the product of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Now, the record of those miracles stands in the word of God as a testament to the credibility of the Bible writers. God is not speaking to man today as He was to the apostles and prophets of the first century. Therefore, miracles

have fulfilled their purpose and belong in the history of the church. If miracles are occurring today, what are they substantiating? What are they confirming that hasn't already been substantiated or confirmed by the miracles of the first century?

We have the Bible to read and obey today because of the work of the Holy Spirit within the apostles of Christ. And we can place our trust in it, because it was authenticated by the miracles that accompanied its revelation, showing that it could have come from no other source besides God.

Someone may ask though, isn't God the same now as He was back then, and aren't you suggesting that God is not as powerful today by suggesting that miracles don't occur in modern times? Not at all, and that's a great misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what we're saying here. R.C. Trench, in his book on miracles, says that "The miracle is not a greater manifestation of God's power...but it is a different manifestation of His power." Did you get that? Miracles aren't a greater part of God's plan--just a different part. There have been many long periods where God had the power to do what He pleased, but chose not to manifest His power in miraculous ways. That doesn't mean that He was any less God in those times than He was in the times where miracles were performed. In the same way, it is wrong to conclude that God's power and preeminence today relies on the presence of modern miracles. Miracles played a necessary part in the revelation of the Bible, the will of God. That purpose has been fulfilled and now we are left with the product, the inspired scriptures.

II Timothy 3:16-17 "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."