



THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF MIRACLES

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The bible record is full of miracles that really happened centuries and millennia ago. What is their purpose, and have we been given the power to perform them today? We're glad you've joined us for another study of God's word... On last week's program we talked about gifts of the Holy Spirit such as the gifts of prophecy and knowledge and the gift of speaking in tongues. Another of those gifts, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:10 was the gift of working miracles. The apostles gave some in the early church this power. The word miracle is often misused and misapplied. Many things that appear extraordinary or incredibly impressive are often thought of as miracles. 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 can do something amazing. But I think we've lost sight of what a miracle really is.

Let's read from Corinthians 12:8-11. Paul writes: *"For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the **working of miracles**; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will."* 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? We'll answer those questions in today's study: THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF MIRACLES, after a song from the congregation.

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. 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 them 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. And they are, for God framed the laws that allow and govern those events. However, neither one is what the bible is talking about when it used the word "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 in a different language thousands of years ago. The Greek 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 it is part of a demonstrable law in God's creation and can be tested and repeated, like other things science can observe and describe. 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. The creation in the beginning was indeed miraculous but God sustains His creation by the means of natural laws He ordained. Practicing medical science is not the same thing as performing a miracle. It may be aided by God's providence, but the techniques of medicine are based on the laws of science such as biology and chemistry, and so forth. It is not necessarily a miracle when a sick person gets better. The hand of God may providentially be involved, but a miracle is not necessarily involved.

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 chapter 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 superseded the laws of the universe 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. It bewildered even the fiercest of Jesus' enemies. 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. What Jesus did defies any natural explanation.

One time Jesus immediately brought sight to the eyes of a man who had been blind all his life. A few years ago, I had a surgery that allowed me to see clearly. I was dependent on glasses for most of my life and couldn't 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 couldn't hardly believe it when I sat up a few minutes after the surgery and could read the clock on the wall all the way across the room. That was several years ago, and age is now making me far sighted and so the glasses eventually had to return. But that surgery, at the time was impressive to me, but it wasn't a miracle. What Jesus did, however, 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. And so 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's 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. I am unashamed to confess to you that I believe all those things really happened just as the bible says that they did. I serve Christ today because I believe with all my heart that He resurrected from the dead and ascended to heaven. 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 suspending natural law. The claims of supposed miracle workers today, however, don't match that definition. They claim to heal the sick, but their healing campaigns are always surrounded by a cloud of suspicion and doubt and some of them have been exposed through the years for using slight-of-hand techniques to pick people out of the crowd to heal who really weren't that sick. There is also a vast difference over 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.

There's an interesting fact if you examine the bible's record of miracles and that is that no one ever seemed to dispute that what they saw was a miracle! I don't read where anyone ever tried to explain away the wonders that Jesus performed. No, rather, the Pharisee's had to resort to attributing the power of Christ to the devil to try and discredit Him, according to Matthew the twelfth chapter. They would have made fools of themselves had they denied that Jesus was performing miracles because thousands upon thousands had seen Him do it and there was no question. If people today were able to perform miracles like Christ and His apostles and others in the early church could do, there would be no question about the matter today either. People would likely argue about where the power came from to do it but they wouldn't argue that miracles were happening because that's the very nature of miracles. In fact, if miracles were not undeniable, then they would not serve their divine purpose which leads us to the next portion of our study which is, WHY were miracles performed in Bible times? If we can answer that question, it will help us learn whether 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. Jesus didn't solicit money from people in exchange for some kind of miracle. He didn't go around pedaling 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 primarily 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 primary 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. Moses was empowered to perform miracles to establish his authority over the Hebrew people and with the Egyptians according to Exodus the third and fourth chapters. According to 1st 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. When Jesus performed His first miracle, John tells us “This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him” John 2:11. When He raised Lazarus from the dead, He told the disciples that He purposefully didn’t go to see Lazarus when He was sick. He said in John 11:15 “And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe.” 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 concludes his gospel account by telling us; “Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Now then, Jesus not only performed miracles to prove His own deity, but He imparted the power to work miracles to his apostles and to 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. Listen to the Hebrew writer in chapter 2, verses 3 and 4; “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, 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 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.

In Mark 16:14-20. The record says; “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.” 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’s 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 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 what they were receiving was truly the will of God.

So, do people have the same power to perform miracles today? Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 that miraculous gifts of the Spirit would fulfil their purpose and cease at an appointed time. If you missed our study last week, I hope you'll go back and view it or request the transcript. Paul simply taught the Corinthians that the church was in a state of infancy when it was established 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 then 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.

Friend, it is not a question of "Does God have the power to perform miracles?" Of course, He does! God is omnipotent and He is sovereign and can do as He chooses. The question is, does God give people today the power to PERFORM miracles as He did in the early church and at other times when He was giving new revelation. The bible teaches that the New Testament is God's full and final revelation to man. That word was confirmed by the miracles that accompanied the giving of that revelation. The record of those miracles stands in the word of God as a testament to the credibility of the Bible writers. 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.

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