

Do Miracles Happen Today?

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The Bible records a great number of miracles that were witnessed by thousands of people throughout the known world. These miracles *physically* benefited the thousands of people who were affected by them. The dead were raised, the crippled, sick and diseased were healed, the blind, deaf and mute were cured, and the demon-possessed were freed. Miracles demonstrated God's power over both the physical and spiritual domains. They served as *signs* and *wonders* that testified to the existence of a power that is far greater than what man possesses. As we shall see in this study, these supernatural events served a special purpose. Sadly, too many people largely ignore this purpose today.

Though humans were physically benefited by miracles, this was not their primary purpose. Consider these words of the apostle John:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30, 31).

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God: the Christ of Old Testament promise and prophecy. His miracles proved this claim. The “works” that he did proved that he was “sent by the Father” (John 5:36).

Miracles Do Not Produce Faith

It is commonly believed and argued that miracles are needed today in order to produce faith and lead men to God. However, miracles, by themselves, do not produce faith. John said that belief in Christ would come from the things that were “*written*” (John 20:30, 31). The apostle Paul said, “*So then, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*” (Rom. 10:17). Bible miracles did not produce faith: they provided *confirmation* of the **message**, which produced faith. Some people witnessed miracles of Jesus and claimed that they were performed by Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24). Though these people witnessed a miracle, no faith was produced, because prejudice prevented these people from associating the miracle with the actual person performing the miracle. Herod and certain Pharisees wanted to see miracles for the mere entertainment value. They wanted to experience the exhilaration of amazement. To such people, miracles were just really good magic tricks, and they wanted to have their senses challenged (Matthew 16:1; Luke 23:8). Again, no faith was produced in such people,

because they made no connection between the miracle, and the *message* that the miracle was designed to *confirm*.

In giving the great commission to the apostles to go “teach all nations,” Jesus told them that certain “*signs*” would attend their teaching (Mark 16:17). Writing from a *post* perspective of the apostle’s work, Mark recorded, “*And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs*” (Mark 16:20). Mark observed that the promise by Jesus was fulfilled. And while it is true that people physically benefited from miracles, the primary function of those miracles was to **confirm God’s word**. With Mark’s words agree the words of the Hebrew writer in Hebrews 2:4:

“While God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

Clearly, “*signs, wonders, miracles and spiritual gifts*” served the purpose of **confirming the gospel message** as being **from God**. They constituted a stamp of divine approval that what was being said was of divine authorship and authenticity. Miracles were proofs of inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16). According to the Scriptures, miracles served their purpose in confirming the gospel message as divine.

The Present Controversy

There is a long running debate between religious people over the question of whether or not New Testament miracles continue today. Of course, there are modernists and skeptics who deny that miracles have *ever* existed. This particular study is not directed at them. This particular study is for those who agree that the Bible is the inspired, infallible and all-sufficient Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16, 17), and who claim to accept what the Bible says. The disagreement within this group of people is not over the *fact* of miracles, but over the *age* or *lifespan* of miracles. Some affirm that (Bible) miracles are still being performed today. Others (including myself) affirm that miracles were performed for a providentially established time and purpose, then ceased.

Defining Terms: What is a “Miracle?”

If one defines a *miracle* as being nothing more than an unusual and rare occurrence, or odd event, then miracles have not ceased. And this is the problem: people have different definitions of the word “miracle.” Needless controversies have arisen due to the use of these different (often conflicting) definitions.

For example, some will call it a “miracle” if a person happens to escape serious injury after being involved in a bad car crash. Some speak of the “miraculous” recovery that someone had after an injury or a surgery. People will sometimes describe it as “a miracle” that they were able to acquire a certain job, or that they were able to get a certain parking space on an occasion when they were running late for an important meeting. During the time of my writing this study, I saw a news item about a dog releasing the parking brake of a vehicle, and it rolling uncontrollably across a parking lot. In an interview with a news reporter, the owner described it as “a miracle” that no one was injured. Obviously, we need to define the word *miracle!*

Webster defines a miracle as “*An event or effect contrary to the established constitution and course of things, or a deviation from the known laws of nature; a supernatural event, or one transcending the ordinary laws by which the universe is governed.*” The Bible uses the word “miracle” of actions that involved the setting aside of natural laws. In the miracles of the loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:15-21; 15:32-38), we see Jesus creating or replicating bread and fish. Jesus (and Peter, conditionally) walked on water (Matthew 14:25-32). Did Jesus set aside the law of gravity for that specific time and location? Did he change the tensile strength of water? We don’t know with certainty. Natural laws and known scientific models and methods of testing cannot explain miracles.

Most significant in the difference between New Testament miracles and modern alleged miracles is the *timing* involved in the events. The operative word in the accounts of New Testament miracles is the word ***immediately***:

Matthew 8:3 – When Jesus touched a leper, willing him to be clean, “***immediately*** his leprosy was cleansed.” Even with today’s technology leprosy cannot be cured *immediately!*

Matthew 8:13 – The Centurion’s paralyzed servant was healed (in a remote location) “***in the very hour***” that Jesus spoke the word.

Matthew 20:34 – When Jesus touched the eyes of the blind men, “***immediately*** they received their sight...”

Mark 1:31 – When Peter’s wife’s mother lay sick with a fever, Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up, “***and immediately*** the fever left her, and she ministered to them.”

Mark 2:11, 12 – When Jesus told the man who was sick with Palsy to arise and take up his bed, the man “*immediately arose, took up his bed and went out before them...*”

Acts 3:7, 8 – When Peter and John healed the lame man, “*immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked...*” Certain facts about this case should be noted. First, this *man was well known* in the community. He was over forty years old when he was healed (Acts 4:22). This was a long enough time for him to develop relationships with many different people in Jerusalem. Second, *his condition was well known* by those that knew him. Being positioned daily at the Temple gate to ask for alms, he had been in public view for all worshipping people to see (Acts 3:2). Third, he had been in his crippled condition *for a long time*, having been lame from his mother’s womb to the age of over 40 years (Acts 3:2). This miracle was indeed, “*a notable miracle that cannot be denied*” (Acts 4:16).

Acts 9:18 – When Ananias healed Saul’s blindness “*immediately something like fish scales fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again.*”

Acts 9:34 – Aeneas was a man of Lydda who was paralyzed and had been confined to cot for eight years. When Peter told him that Jesus made him well and that he could get up and pick up his cot, “*Aeneas immediately got up.*”

Bible examples like these could be multiplied, but these are sufficient to make the point. Bible miracles were *instantaneous*. Those who benefited from miracles did not have to wait for years to receive the benefit of the miracle. This is far different than the so-called “miracles” of today. Many people mistake God’s *providence* for *miracles*. By providence, God has *provided* the basic elements of the physical realm that can be cultured, combined and converted into life saving medicines. By God’s design, the human body has remarkable reparative and recuperative capabilities. Let us not mistake natural functions for *supernatural* functions. Some people recover from sickness and disease more quickly and easily than do others, and a *quick* recovery is not necessarily a *miraculous* recovery.

The “Time and Chance” Factor

The word “miracle” is often heard in the context of natural disasters and accidents. When a tornado sweeps through a neighborhood, destroying houses but leaving some, there will always be someone whose house was undisturbed who will exclaim that, “it was a miracle!” Let us remember that a “miracle” is the setting aside of the laws of nature. What natural law is

overruled when twisting high force winds weave through a subdivision, destroying one house and leaving another? Is this really a miracle? People are quick to assume that such deliverance amounts to *direct divine intervention* in their favor. If one calls it “a miracle” that some houses were not destroyed by the tornado, what do we call it that some house *were* destroyed? Was it also “a miracle” that the tornado *did hit* the other houses? Was God directly intervening in destroying those houses? If God directly intervened to steer the tornado out of the path of one house, did he also directly intervene in steering that same tornado into the path of another house? The biblical events that were identified as miracles did not have some other plausible explanation for their occurrence. The events that I have described above do have other possible explanations.

Consider vehicle crashes: It is often described as “a miracle” when one person survives a car crash in which others are killed. What do we call it for the people who were killed? Was it a miracle that they *were* killed? If God directly intervened in saving the one, did he directly intervene in the killing of the others? We must be careful here, for a false assumption can cause people to think that God has respect of persons, and is unfair in his dealings with people; that he treats some people better than others. If God miraculously intervenes to save one, then why does he not miraculously intervene to others? This is particularly troubling for such people when they see the “righteous” suffer and perish, and the “wicked” survive and prosper.

There is a better explanation for what happens in these cases. Solomon said,

*“I returned and saw under the sun that-- The race [is] not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But **time** and **chance** happen to them all”* (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

Tragedies strike in inexplicable ways. Things happen in nature that make no sense to us. In such cases, Solomon’s words are reassuring. Just as it is not necessarily *miraculous* when a good thing happens to us, neither is it necessarily divinely *retributive* when bad things happen. We are subject to the law of “*time and chance*.”

The “Worse Sinner” Theory

People often claim that the reason that some are “miraculously” saved from tragedies and disasters, and others are not, is because of *sin*. It is reasoned that those who are “righteous,” or at least “more righteous,” are

miraculously delivered by God, while the “unrighteous” or “less righteous” are not.

When told about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, Jesus replied, “*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all of the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them: do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish*” (Luke 13:1-5). Jesus was clear: physical disasters and social injustices should not necessarily be interpreted as *miraculous divine intervention*. Neither should it be assumed that one’s survival of some catastrophic event constitutes miraculous divine intervention. These poor people were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Time and chance are such that we actually see good and bad people spared from tragedy, just as we see good and bad people suffer in tragedies.

The Bible actually teaches that “the wicked prosper (physically)” (Jeremiah 12:1; Job 21:7; Psalm 73:3), and the righteous sometimes do not (Book of Job). It is therefore a mistake to attempt to assign divine cause to an event on the mere basis of “righteousness” or “wickedness.” There is no scriptural basis from which one can argue that it is a “miracle” when a “righteous” person survives a tragedy.

Proofs That Bible Miracles Have Ceased

1. We don’t see miracles being performed today. If you saw a miracle you would know it, for it could not be dismissed as a mere oddity or abnormality. Genuine miracles cannot be denied. Here is what people said about the miracle that Peter and John performed at Jerusalem: “*What shall we do with these men? For that a notable miracle has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and we cannot deny it*” (Acts 4:16). It should be observed that those who made this acknowledgement were professed *enemies* of the church. They were not sympathetic to the way of Christ, which makes their characterization of the miracle as being “notable” and “undeniable” all the more meaningful.

There is an old adage that “the proof is in the pudding.” Where are genuine, Bible-caliber miracles being performed today? Where are the dead being raised? Where are deadly storms being calmed? Where are withered limbs being instantly restored? Where are crippled people being healed? Where are infectious diseases and sicknesses being cured? We simply do not

see these things being done today. Could the reason simply be that they are not happening?

Of course, some do claim to see miracles today. I have observed that with the so-called “miracles” of today, there are always possible alternative explanations for what happened. An exceedingly quick recovery may mean only that the person’s immune system was strong, resilient and functioning well. The house may have been missed by the tornado merely because the erratic winds shifted to the left, rather than to the right. The lone car crash survivor may have simply been in the best physical position to withstand the blow that was fatal to the other passengers. My point is that these are not *necessarily* miracles. The outcome may be attributed to other things.

2. God placed a providential time limitation upon the miracle age. The miracle age would end, by default, upon the death of the last person upon whom the last living apostle had laid his hands. Along with giving them the ability to *perform* miracles, God also gave the apostles the ability to *lay their hands upon others* to confer upon them the ability to obtain some miraculous gift (Acts 8:14-17; Acts 19:6). The saints at Samaria and Ephesus could not receive the Holy Spirit until this was done. Note that even Philip the evangelist could not pass such abilities on to others. It was peculiarly an apostolic function. We read of *no other way* for this ability to be passed on, or conferred upon other people. **By reason of the inevitability of the death of the apostles, and the death of those on whom the apostles had laid their hands, the miracle age would end.** This end could have been several years after the death of the last living apostle, but it would inevitably happen. Conceivably, an old apostle (perhaps John) could have laid his hands upon a young Christian, thus allowing miracles to extend some time up into the second century AD. However, upon the death of the last person on whom apostolic hands had been laid, the miracle age would end.

3. The Bible predicted the end of the miracle age. A careful and contextual consideration of 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 provides an answer that is perfectly consistent with all that we have considered thus far. This passage pinpoints, not an exact time or date, but a *point* at which miraculous gifts would “*be done away.*” This passage contains an abbreviated listing of the spiritual gifts that are listed in the *same verses* of the previous chapter (12:8-10). This is significant, for it shows that Paul is discussing the same thing in chapter 13 that he was in chapter 12: Particularly, the role of spiritual gifts in the revelation of God’s will. Let us consider the passage:

“Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for

tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:8-12).

The contrast is between the *partial* and the *perfect*. This Greek word for “perfect” means *complete*. Thus Paul is contrasting partial knowledge with complete knowledge. The context has to do with information or *revelation* from God.

The child / adult illustration contrasts the difference between partial knowledge and complete knowledge. Children do have knowledge, and they are able to articulate that knowledge from a very young age. However, their limited knowledge is sporadic and disjointed. At this stage children are likely to say things that adults find humorous. They get some things right and some things wrong. Until they acquire more knowledge and experience, they will *reason* and *speak* as children. Paul, using himself as an example, said that is what he did. Of course, like other children, Paul eventually grew up. He became a “man.” In becoming a man he “gave up childish things.” Partial knowledge was replaced with full knowledge. The same is true in the spiritual realm with regard to divine revelation.

Paul also used an illustration contrasting the dimness of a mirror with the actual appearance. (It should be noted that mirror quality has improved over the past 2000 years.) A dim (partial) representation would be replaced with a full and clear image. Paul could then “*know fully*” and be “*fully known*.” Interestingly, the completed New Testament gives us a very clear picture of the character and work of the apostle Paul. He can now be “fully known.” Paul is obviously contrasting *partial revelation* with *full revelation*.

The nine spiritual gifts that were enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 are all tied in some way to the process of divine revelation. God’s objective was the deliverance of the “perfect” (complete) revelation. Paul is here describing this completion process. The process that would eventually result in a complete revelation involved the transmission of information in bits and pieces. Computer savvy individuals are familiar with the term “packets,” which describes blocks of information that are digitally transmitted, either

by wires or by signal, from one device to another. Over the course of time, God communicated his will to humans by such packets.

“Long ago, at many times and in many different ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Hebrews 1:1, 2).

According to Hebrews 2:3 and 2 Peter 3:2, what was “spoken” by Christ was repeated by his chosen apostles and by other Spirit-guided men. The final result was *“the faith that was **once for all delivered** to the saints”* (Jude 3). All of the parts have been assembled into one body of teaching that we call the *Bible*. Miraculous methods were used to *reveal* this information, and miracles were used to *confirm* the information.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is describing the end of the revelation process. He said, *“For now we know in part, and prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.”* His point is that partial information will be replaced by complete information. The divine information that was once known in “parts” would one day be known in *whole*. The piecemeal process of revelation would eventually be *completed*, and it would end. With the end of revelation would come the end of the *“signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit,”* which were God’s way of expressing his approval of that message (Hebrews 2:4; Mark 16:20).

“The Perfect” and Christ

Those who claim that miracles continue today would have us to believe that Paul’s reference to “the perfect,” in 1 Corinthians 13:10, is to “Christ.” The argument has Paul affirming that miracles will continue until the second coming of Christ. This argument is based, not upon context, but upon the particular words “perfect” and “come,” and some contrived definitions and applications of those words. Paul is not contrasting a *process* with a *person* (Christ), but a *partial* process with a *completed* process (revelation). This is evident from both the *context*, and the actual meaning of the word “perfect.” The Greek word *teleios* means *complete, mature, full-grown*. The word “perfect” is a neuter adjective, which makes it a grammatical stretch to apply the word to *Christ*. And though it is certainly true that Christ is perfect in the sense of *impeccability*, this is not the meaning of the word “perfect” in this verse. The phrase, “the perfect,” refers

not to Christ, but to the completed *law* of Christ. The inspired James spoke of “*the perfect law of liberty*” (James 1:25).

Conclusion

Though the “miracles” of modern, watered-down definition may exist, Bible-styled miracles have ceased. Signs, wonders and miracles served their purpose of confirming God’s word, and they are no longer necessary. Once a thing is confirmed, it is forever confirmed. Things do not have to be “reconfirmed” in order to be true. The very words that are used by the Bible to describe supernatural activity and intervention are proof of their obsolescence. “Signs” *signified* God’s presence and approval in the supernatural action that confirmed the speaker’s words. The word “wonders” emphasizes the attention-grabbing aspect. Miracles excited *wonder* in the minds of the hearers and viewers. The word “miracle” is from a Greek word that means *power (dunamis)*. Miracles confirmed the presence of supernatural power. This action, in a bold way, constituted a strong stamp of divine approval of the messenger and his message. To believe the Bible we must believe in miracles, but it is important that we believe what the Bible actually teaches about the lifespan and purpose of miracles.

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