

MIRACLES

1. WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

The word ‘miracle’ is very commonly used today. Here are some examples:

- better performance than expected in an examination
- disappearance of headache after prayer
- unexpectedly meeting someone in town who you wanted to see
- receiving money just when you were in desperate need

Is a miracle just an unusual, unexplained event? We must get our definition from the Scriptures first and then we can be sure we are interpreting the events around us properly. We believe that God is actively controlling everything that takes place in this world. All things are according to His will. God normally works through means – clouds bring rain, people bring gifts, medicine brings healing – and we call this God’s *providence*. Sometimes God does something that makes it obvious that it is from a power greater than any human power. The Bible uses 3 words for such acts, and these define what a true miracle is. Note that such acts can also be done by evil powers.

(a) SIGNS. When something is done that is called a ‘sign’, that work shows that the one doing it is an authorized messenger of a greater power.

- *Moses* performed signs in Egypt (Acts 7:36, see Ex.4:1-9, 7:8ff.)
- *Jesus’* works are called signs, especially in John’s Gospel: turning of water into wine (Jn.2:11), healing of official’s son (Jn.4:54), feeding of the 5000 (Jn.6:14,26), healing of blind man (Jn.9:16), raising of Lazarus (Jn.12:18), and generally (Lk.23:8, Jn.2:23, 3:2, 6:2, 7:31, 11:47, 12:37, 20:30, Acts 2:22). By contrast it is mentioned that John the Baptist did none (Jn.10:41).
- Jews constantly asked Jesus to show them a sign that would ‘prove’ He came from God (Matt.12:38-39, 16:1-4, Mk.8:11-12, Lk.11:16,29-30, Jn.2:18, 4:48, 6:30, 1 Cor.1:22). He always refused such a request as such a work would be no proof of His divine mission.
- *Apostles, Stephen & Philip* did works that are called signs: healing of lame man (Acts 4:16,22), apostles (Mk.16:17,20, Acts 2:43, 5:12, 14:3, 15:12, Rm.15:19, 2 Cor.12:12, Heb.2:4), Stephen (Acts 6:8), Philip (Acts 8:6,13).
- *Evil powers* can also perform works that are called signs: false Christs and false prophets (Matt.24:24, Mk.13:22), the ‘lawless one’ (2 Thess.2:9), the beast out of the earth also called the false prophet (Rev.13:13-14, 16:14, 19:20), and remember magicians of Egypt (Ex.7:11,22, 8:7,18-19). Such works are signs of a messenger being sent, but he may be from God or from a supernatural evil power.

(b) WONDERS. These same works are called wonders because of the amazement they produce on those who witness them. They are obviously works not normally done by human beings, and they are works which are not part of our normal experience. As such things are by definition unusual and uncommon, and because they are done in the sight of an audience that is consequently amazed, most works that are claimed as ‘miracles’ today do not fit into this Biblical category.

- *Moses* performed wonders in Egypt (Acts 7:36).
- *Jesus'* ministry was characterized by performing such wonders (Acts 2:22).
- Jews sought that He would perform wonders (Jn.4:48).
- *Apostles and Stephen* performed works called 'wonders' (Acts 2:43, 4:30, 5:12, 6:8, 14:3, 15:12, Rm.15:19, 2 Cor.12:12, Heb.2:4).
- *Evil powers* can also perform such wonders: false Christs and false prophets (Matt.24:24, Mk.13:22, 2 Thess.2:9, the 'lawless one' (2 Thess.2:9).

Once again, the performance of such 'wonders' does not guarantee that the performer has been sent from God.

(c) MIGHTY WORKS. These same works are called "mighty works", or literally 'power', because the source is always some superhuman power.

- *Jesus* performed mighty works in the cities of Galilee (Matt.11:20-23, 13:54, Mk.6:2, Lk.10:13), and we are specifically told that they were done by the power of the Lord (Lk.5:17, Acts 10:38, see Matt.14:2, Mk.6:14). Such power was resident in Him (Lk.6:19, 8:46). His ministry was full of such mighty works (Lk.19:37, Acts 2:22). In Nazareth we are told that He could not these mighty works because of their unbelief (Matt.13:58, Mk.6:5).
- *Some True Disciples* did such mighty works: Stephen (Acts 6:8), Philip (Acts 8:13), Paul (Acts 19:11, Rm.15:19, 2 Cor.12:12, Gal.3:5), Apostles (Heb.2:4), some gifted Christians (Mk.9:39, 1 Cor.12:10,28-29). Such works could be done only by the power of God (Lk.9:1, Acts 3:12, 4:7).
- *Some False Believers* (Matt.7:22).
- *Unbelievers*: Simon Magus (Acts 8:10).
- *Evil Powers*: the man of lawlessness (2 Thess.2:9).

Conclusions:

- (1) When we focus on the miracles that Christ and His apostles did we see they are marked by three things. They are signs pointing to who they are; they caused the observers to wonder; and they show greater than human power. If these three are not present then we should not call something a miracle. For Jesus, His miracles were signs that He is the glorious Son of God, sent from God as the Christ (Jn.2:11, see 1:14, 20:30-31). The miracles that the apostles performed show that they are the true ambassadors of Christ (Heb.2:4).
- (2) Because such miracles can be performed by evil powers also, we must never believe a person just because he is able to do such things. This is why we are warned against being deceived (Matt.24:24, Mk.13:22, 2 Thess.2:3,9-10, see 2 Cor.11:12-15). Miracles of God can only bear witness to the true message of God being proclaimed. We must test the spirits by paying attention to what is being spoken. Is it a message that puts Christ and Him crucified in the centre? Is salvation by God's grace in Christ alone? Is salvation received through faith in Christ alone? If not, no amount of miracles should convince us that this messenger is from God.

2. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MIRACLES?

Miracles are not recorded throughout the pages of the Bible. Sometimes centuries pass with no miracle having been recorded. The miracles that are recorded mostly fall into four main periods. Why is this? What was God's purpose in working miracles in these times?

(a) MOSES in the deliverance from Egypt up to the conquest of Canaan.

Two specific reasons are given for such miracles as the 10 plagues:

- Show power of God over all idols of Egypt for His glory (Ex.7:8-9, 9:16, 12:12)
- To convince the Israelites that Moses was a prophet of God, so bringing God's message to them (Ex.4:1-9)

Yet despite such miracles nation as a whole did not profess true faith (Heb.4:2)

(b) ELIJAH & ELISHA in the life and death struggle of true religion with heathenism.

These were very dark days of apostasy. Who is the true God, Jehovah or Baal? Who is the true prophet, Elijah or the 400 prophets of Baal?

- The miracle on Mt. Carmel was to show that Jehovah is the true God (1 Kn.18:36)
- Such miracles as performed through Elijah show that he truly bore the message from God (1 Kn.17:24)

(c) DANIEL in the time of the exile when Jehovah showed His power and supremacy over the gods of the heathen, although His people were in captivity.

- Nebuchadnezzar was convinced that Daniel's God is the God of gods (2:47, 3:15,29, 4:25,34-35,37, 6:16,20,26)
- Nebuchadnezzar was convinced that Daniel was a prophet of God (2:46-48, 4:18, 5:11-12)

(d) JESUS & HIS APOSTLES in the very accomplishment and revelation of our redemption

- Primarily to glorify God in showing His power and mercy (Jn.11:4, see 9:1-3)
- To witness to Jesus as the Messiah from God (Jn.3:2, 5:36, 6:14, 10:25, 14:11, 15:24, 20:30)
- To witness the truth of apostolic message (Acts 14:3, Heb.2:4)
- To help people to believe in Him as the Messiah (Jn.2:23, 11:45, 14:11, 20:31, Rm.15:18-19)
- To show God's concern for needs of His sinful and helpless creatures (Acts 10:38)

Each of these periods times of revelation, so miracles associated with prophets

Not only reason, but a major reason was to authenticate a prophet being from God at a critical time in history of redemption

So at such time miracles far more common than at any other time

Today is not a time when new revelation is being given, there are no prophets like those in Bible, so it is not a time for many miracles

3. THE APOSTLES AND MIRACLES

(i) *Great Emphasis is Laid on Performance of Miracles by the Apostles.*

Acts 2:43, 4:30, 5:12, 9:36ff., 14:3, 19:11, Rm.15:19, Heb.2:3-4, see 6:8, 8:6
Were there miracle workers in Corinth (12:10,28), considering there were no apostles?

In 2 Cor.12:12 'signs' probably not the miracles, for distinguished from them, worked in all patience, and distinguish him from false apostles

(ii) It was the Apostles who Conferred the Ability to Work Miracles

Jesus conferred it on His disciples (Matt.10:1, Lk.10:17-20)

Acts 8:5-19, 10:44-46, 19:4-6, 2 Tim.1:6

None in Rome as no apostolic ministry (1:11)

Conclusion: Miracles are inseparably linked with apostles.

4. ARE THERE APOSTLES TODAY?

The word ‘apostle’ = a person who is commissioned by another for a particular work, and so given full authority to act on his behalf. The word is used in two ways in the New Testament:

- Specifically and most commonly, as an apostle of ‘Jesus Christ’
- More generally, one who is sent by another person (Jn.13:16, “he who is sent” = apostle), or church (2 Cor.8:23, Phil.2:25 “messenger” = apostle)

The apostles of Jesus Christ could be identified by specific marks, as the Bible expects Christians to distinguish between true and false (2 Cor.11:13 and context, Rev.2:2)

(i) Qualifications of an Apostle.

a. Eye-witness of resurrection (Acts 1:22, 4:33)

Paul saw Christ (Acts 9:5-6, 26:15-18, 1 Cor.9:1, 15:7-9)

b. Commissioned by Christ (Matt.10:1-7, Acts 1:8,24-26, 26:16-17, Gal.1:1, etc.)

(ii) Who were Apostles of Christ?

The Twelve that Jesus chose (Lk.6:13-16, see 8:1, 9:1,12, 18:31, 22:3, Acts 6:2, 1 Cor.15:5, Rev.21:14)

Matthias replaced Judas (Acts 1:24-26)

Paul was last to be appointed by Christ (1 Cor.15:8-9)

James, brother of our Lord, probably an apostle (1 Cor.15:7, Gal.1:19)

Perhaps also Barnabas (Acts 14:4,14), even Silas (1 Thess.2:6)

But not Timothy (2 Cor.1:1, 1 Thess.3:1-2), nor Andronicus & Junias (Rm.16:7)

(iii) Marks of an Apostle

a. Unique authority in the church (1 Cor.14:37-38, 2 Thess.3:6,14), through inspiration of Holy Spirit (Jn.14:26, 16:13)

b. Witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 1:22, 2:32, 3:15, 4:33, 5:32, 10:39,41, 13:31)

c. Performance of Signs and Wonders (Acts 5:12, 14:3, Rm.15:18-19, Heb.2:4), including conferring miraculous gifts on others (Acts 8:18, 19:6)

(iv) Apostles Today?

Paul clearly states he was the last to whom Jesus personally appeared

Apostles are foundation of church (Eph.2:20), so to have apostles today is to be rebuilding foundation – note apostles are first in lists in 1 Cor.12:28 & Eph.4:11

No major Christian leaders have ever claimed apostleship

Only successors of apostles are their writings in Scripture – these writings are absolutely authoritative, so that to obey/disobey them is to obey/disobey God

Wrong of any man to claim divine inspiration and demand total obedience

But if all the gifts are still for us today then there must also be apostles

We are ready to accept that all the gifts may not be present today because purpose fulfilled

Against Catholic view of apostolic succession, and charismatic view on gifts today

5. COMPARISON OF NEW TESTAMENT & PRESENT-DAY MIRACLES

(i) *Christ and His apostles did not require faith of everyone before healing them.*

Jesus did not require faith in the centurion's servant (Matt.8:5-10), the daughter of Jairus (Mk.5:35-43), the demonized man of the Gadarenes (Lk.8:26-39), the 9 of the 10 lepers (Lk.17:11-19), Malchus a slave of the high priest (Lk.22:51-52). Nothing is said about the faith of Aeneas when Peter healed him (Acts 9:32-35). This is in marked contrast to those who claim to heal today who, when they fail, blame it on the lack of faith of the sick person.

(ii) *Christ and His apostles healed **all** who came to them.*

This feature is emphasized again and again with Christ's miracles of healing (Matt.8:16, 12:15, Lk.4:40, Acts 10:38, see also Matt.14:14), as with the apostles (Acts 5:16, 28:9). Except with the disciples before Pentecost (Mk.9:14ff.) no failure is recorded even by the apostles. Today almost all healers acknowledge that not everyone is healed. So whatever gift they have is not the gift of healing that we read of in the Bible.

(iii) *Christ and His apostles healed all **kinds** of diseases.*

They not only healed functional diseases in which the bodily organ is in good condition but is not working properly; but also in cases where the bodily organ was faulty – blind eyes, deaf ears, crippled feet (Matt.4:24, 9:35, Acts 28:9). Healers today usually concentrate on functional disorders that are much harder to evaluate. Some healers say they are gifted with only certain disorders. But the pattern in the New Testament is healing of whatever disease is present, even raising the dead.

(iv) *Christ and His apostles healed where they met the situation.*

For example, Jesus raised the son of the widow of Nain as he was being carried out to be buried (Lk.7:11-17); Peter healed Aeneas as he was lying on his own bed at home (Acts 9:32-35). Why do modern-day healers have to have healing crusades and orchestrate their healings under their own conditions on stage? If they have such powers, why do they not go into the hospitals and heal the sick there? The simple answer is that they cannot. The few foolhardy individuals who have tried have obviously failed and probably blamed it on the lack of faith of the patients. Where today are those who are doing greater works, in terms of miracles, that they claim Jn.14:12 is referring to? Such greater works depend on the faith of the worker, not on the faith of the recipient.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul does list a gift of healing (1 Cor.12:9,28,30). This does not mean that there were definitely such gifts present in Corinth – there is no evidence there was. Tongues was undoubtedly far too prominent (ch.14). We can be sure from the evidence we have of what is happening, that the gift of healing miracles as displayed by Christ and His apostles is not present today. Where are those who even claim to feed 5000 famine victims? God does heal today, but no man has that gift of miracles as Christ or a Peter had. On one occasion we are told that Christ could not do any mighty work because of the unbelief of the Nazarenes (Mk.6:5-6). This does *not* mean that Christ was made powerless in the face of unbelief; but that unbelief is the wrong soil in which to display His glory through His miracles. He could not work because He would not.

6A. PROBLEM TEXT 1 – MARK 16:17-18

(a) *Should this passage be in the Bible at all?*

- Modern versions are not happy with it –
 RSV says “some ancient authorities bring book to a close after v.8”
 NASB puts it in brackets, saying “some of the oldest mss do not contain it”
 NIV says “the most reliable mss do not have these verses”
- There is a wide range of evidence that vv.9-20 were not originally part of the Gospel as Mark wrote it, including 2 oldest manuscripts of the New Testament, versions (early translations) and quotations from writers in the early church.
- There is also internal (= from the verses themselves) evidence because they contain a large non-Markan vocabulary; v.9 does not fit well with v.8 because it assumes a different subject, nothing is written about Galilee, and there is repetition about Mary Magdalene.
- There are possible problems also with the teaching of these verses, especially of v.18. If it refers to **all** believers, and an ability to deliberately pick up serpents, and drink poison; then there are no true believers! Nor can a believer be satisfied with one gift – he must have them all.

Conclusion: These verses are probably not original to Mark’s Gospel, and were added early on because of the feeling that v.8 ends too abruptly. In fact there are a variety of endings in the manuscripts.

(b) *Possible interpretation if it is genuine Scripture*

Theme of these verses is the unbelief of the apostles (vv.11,13,14). It is a different situation from Matthew’s Great Commission – here there are just the 11 at table. Therefore the believing of v.17 refers not to the believers of v.16, but to the apostles who believe Christ has risen from dead and are going to fulfil the commission. It is such apostles will have the authenticating signs. In fact we only have examples of apostles casting out demons, and laying hands on the sick; Paul was accidentally bitten by a snake (Acts 28:3-6), but there is no record of any drinking poison; many others spoke in tongues however. There is no evidence here for universal tongues or ability to heal.

Conclusion: The specific reference is to the apostles, not all believers.

6B. PROBLEM TEXT 2 – JAMES 5:14-15

Many different claims are made on the basis of this text. The Roman Catholics justify their sacrament of extreme unction from it, although the text speaks of the recovery of the sick person, not his death! It is the basis for many divine healing ministries, and it has given rise to the teaching that Christians need never be sick. It is in fact the only instruction for healing in the Bible (see 1 Tim.5:23).

- (a) *What the sick person is to do* (v.14a). The sick person is literally one ‘without strength’. This is not a person with a minor headache, but one probably confined to bed (he will be raised up, v.15), who is greatly troubled by his condition. See the use of the word in Mk.6:56, Jn.4:46, 5:3,7, 11:1ff., Acts 9:37, Phil.2:26-27, 2 Tim.4:20. There is probably the particular situation where there is reason to believe that the illness has come about as a chastisement for sin (as 1 Cor.11:30). The first step is to be taken by the sick person himself – ‘call the elders of the church’. It is significant that it is the elders, not some gifted healer, that are to be called; nor is he to request to be taken to some healing crusade. This shows the centrality of the local church, and of the elders in the spiritual lives of the members.

(b) *What the elders are to do* (v.14b).

- The emphasis is on their activity of praying, not on the anointing with oil. The Jewish believers to whom James was writing put far too much emphasis on external religion but at the same time were guilty of the most shameful sins against each other (read the letter). They were always concerned with what ceremonial service that might make in every situation, for example, vows (5:12). James shows the simple approach to God in different situations – in times of trouble, pray for God’s help; in times of happiness, sing His praises (5:13); in times of sickness call the elders to pray. What great value prayer has.
- Such prayer is to be made “in the Name of the Lord” = in accordance with His mind, and on His authority. The elders are to remember all that the Lord says in His Word about sickness, its causes, its usefulness, and to pray accordingly. That is the only authority they have. There is no authority from Christ to cast out the ‘demons of sickness’, to assure the sick one that healing is guaranteed if only he has enough faith.
- In connection with prayer the sick person is to be anointed with oil. The word used for anointing is the one usually used for a medicinal or refreshing purpose (Matt.6:17, Mk.16:1, Lk.7:38,46, Jn.11:2, 12:3). Only once is it used in a context where it is probably symbolic of the divine power to heal (Mk.6:13). So I am not sure whether the oil is to be used as a medicine (would be useless against most diseases), or as symbolic of work of Spirit. It is certainly not there as a ceremony that guarantees healing.

(c) *What is the prayer of faith?* (v.15a). There are two possibilities: first, a special sort of prayer in which the one praying is sure of a positive answer; second, a prayer which trusts the Lord will do as He has revealed in His Word. The first possibility seems true if as a result the sick person is guaranteed healing. But the emphasis is not on the guarantee of healing, but that if healing does take place it is by means of prayer, not anointing. It is better to interpret the prayer of faith according to the usual meaning of faith in the Scriptures – dependence upon the revealed Word of God. Faith never insists on anything, only that the will of God be done (see 1 Jn.5:14, see Matt.6:10, 26:39,42). We cannot change God’s will by any act of faith.

(d) *What will the prayer of faith accomplish?* (v.15b). If it is the Lord’s will (see also Jas.4:15), the sick man will be saved = the Lord will raise him up from his bed of sickness (again, it is not the oil). “Save” means to rescue from physical disability, as so often in the Gospels. If this was a guarantee of healing, then there would be no possibility of death. We know that death must come, so there will be a time when the body will succumb to weakness. James now introduces the need for forgiveness, showing the possibility that the sickness is the result of sin. Sickness may be the result of specific sin, but often it is not (Job 2:1-8, Jn.9:3). James has already called upon his readers to be steadfast like Job (5:11). That this passage probably refers to those fewer occasions when sickness is the result of specific sin amongst God’s people (as in 1 Cor.11:30), James adds a call to mutual confession of sin (5:16a), and then appeals to the power of the prayer of Elijah (5:16b-20). Note that Elijah prayed according to God’s revealed will that sin should be visited with drought (Deut.28:23-24). James did not appeal to an example of healing by Elijah, as he could have done, but to one where God’s judgment was removed by the prayer of Elijah. Finally James refers to the work of restoring wandering sinners and even saving them from death (5:19-20).

Conclusion: When difficulties or trials come it is easy to try one method after another to remove them, to try to force God to intervene. James says simply, Pray, and get the elders to pray. If anything will change the situation it is prayer that trusts in the Lord.