

What Kind of Miracle Are You Expecting?

Several years ago in Britain, researchers went door-to-door asking people about their belief in God. One of their questions was: "Do you believe in a God who intervenes in human history, who changes the course of affairs, who performs miracles?" When their study was published, it carried as its title, the most frequent response to that question, which was, "No, I believe in the ordinary God." ⁱ

The God described in the Christmas story is most certainly NOT an "ordinary God." So much of this story is miraculous: a virgin birth; people being directed by dreams, angels and stars; the baby Jesus being saved from a "Roman death squad"; an older man and woman in the Temple prophesying about the future of the baby – miracles are everywhere in this story. But what about YOUR Christmas story? Are you expecting any miracles this year? To answer that, we first need to understand...

I. What Miracles are and What Their Purpose Is

A miracle is "a special supernatural work of God... which is not explicable on the basis of the usual patterns of nature." ⁱⁱ Besides the word "miracle," there are other English words that translate Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic words that refer to these "inexplicable" acts of God. Some of these synonyms for "miracle" are: "wonder," "sign," "mighty act," and "power." What these words point to are the **three characteristics of a biblical miracle:**

1. They are by nature distinct, they grab your attention.
2. They display great power.
3. They are bursting with significance.

Every miracle of God carries these three characteristics.

Next, we need to answer this question: Is a miracle the suspension of a natural law? There are some today, even some theologians, who claim that what Jesus did as miracles in the New Testament really aren't what they appear. In other words, it may have looked like Jesus raised a young girl from death but, in reality, He just used His superior knowledge to realize that she wasn't really dead at all but just in a very, very deep sleep. So, He didn't suspend any natural laws, He just understood them better than His disciples.

This is not true. We know this isn't true for several reasons. First of all, the "higher knowledge" explanation can't explain all the miracles. For example, "higher knowledge" will not enable you to walk on water or calm a storm. "Higher knowledge" will not enable you to turn water into wine instantly. "Higher knowledge" will not enable you to instantly restore a withered hand or a severed ear. No, Jesus' miracles actually suspended natural law to bring healing and blessing to people and glory to His Father.

But here's an important fact: **without faith, you will look at a miracle and not recognize it for what it is.** This is how the Pharisees could stand and watch Jesus perform miracle after miracle but instead of seeing the power of God, they attributed it to the power of Satan (Mk.3:22). C. S. Lewis writes:

This is the first thing to get clear in talking about miracles. Whatever experiences we may have, we shall not regard them as miraculous if we already hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural... We can always say we have been the victims of an illusion; [and] if we disbelieve in the supernatural this is what we always shall say. ⁱⁱⁱ

This is why Jesus always emphasized faith as the necessary companion of miracles. He not only told people that it was their faith that had healed them but, when He went to His hometown, He didn't do many miracles. Why?

...because of their lack of faith. (Matt. 13:58)

It doesn't say He "couldn't" do many miracles there; in fact, it says in Mark 6 that He did heal a few sick people, but He didn't do many. Why? Because it would've been a waste. Which leads us to the next question: **why are miracles performed?** We touched on this a bit last week, but here's a more comprehensive answer.

The first purpose of a miracle is to bring glory to God. Are you aware that each of the ten plagues that God performed through Moses challenged the power of a specific Egyptian god? For example:

Plague of water turned to blood addressed Hapi, spirit of the Nile

Plague of flies addressed Seb, the fly god of Egypt

Plague of hail addressed Nut, Egyptian sky goddess; Isis, goddess of agriculture

Plague of locusts addressed Serapia, Egyptian deity protector from locusts

Plague of darkness addressed Ra & Amon-Ra, Egyptian sun gods

And on and on. And Jesus prayed to His Father, just before going to the cross:

I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. (John 17:4)

The first purpose of a miracle is to bring glory to the Father, to shine a spotlight on Him.

The second purpose of a miracle is to establish the supernatural source of the revelation that accompanies the miracle. What does this mean? It means that a miracle always carries a message from God and the supernatural nature of it is God's signature. You should notice that miracles are not evenly distributed throughout the Bible. Rather, they are bunched together around times of especially intensive revelation from God. And these intensive times of revelation are clustered around spiritual turning points of history.

For example, when Israel needed to be rescued from Egypt, there was an outburst of miracles to convince not only Pharaoh but the Israelites that this rescue was from God. Later, when Israel was turning away from obeying God, the prophets Elijah and Elisha were sent. They performed a cluster of miracles to emphasize that their message of repentance was from God. So, when Jesus came doing miracles, it fit the pattern that God had already established that, when He had an important message for His people, He authenticated the message with His signature – a miracle.

But we must not forget Jesus' warning that in the "Last Days"...

...false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible (which it is not!). (Matt. 24:24)

Satan has the power to perform some signs and miracles. This is how the magicians of Egypt could imitate some of Moses' miracles. So, how can we know the difference? Well, you have to be familiar with God's signature. God's prophets and the apostles always, always, always told people that the power was NOT in them to do miracles but from God. They never called themselves "faith healers," or "miracle workers." Anyone who does that is a fake. Remember the first purpose of a biblical miracle - the glory always goes to God.

The third purpose of a legitimate miracle of God is to address a human need. As we noted last week, Jesus was moved with compassion for those who had an excruciating emotional hurt (Lazarus' sisters), a physical pain (innumerable sick and disabled people) or a significant human need (hunger, financial distress, etc). Jesus unleashed His power to meet "THEIR" needs, not to feed Himself or escape the hurt, pain and financial needs in His own life. Jesus did zero miracles to benefit Himself!! He got no pay for speaking engagements. He said, "No!" when Satan suggested that He use some of His supernatural power to feed Himself in the wilderness. He did nothing to overpower the Roman guards who came to arrest and crucify Him.

There's an old hymn that says:

*He could have called ten thousand angels,
To destroy the world and set Him free.
He could have called ten thousand angels,
But He died alone, for you and me.*

This was also true of all the apostles - the miracles performed through them did not make them rich, handsome or famous. Legitimate miracles are always for the benefit of others, not the one through whom they are delivered. Which brings us to today.

II. Is God Performing Miracles Now?

First of all, as we begin to answer that question, let me share an interesting perspective on this from C. S. Lewis. He's actually written a whole book on the topic of miracles which I highly recommend. The title is, (ready for it!) *Miracles*. But listen to his perspective. He writes:

One of their chief purposes is that men, having seen a thing done by personal power on the small scale, may recognize, when they see the same thing done on the large scale, that the power behind it is also personal - it is indeed the very same person who lived among us two thousand years ago. The miracles in fact are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see...

God creates the vine and teaches it to draw up water by its roots and, with the aid of the sun, to turn that water into a juice which will ferment and take on certain qualities. Thus every year, from Noah's time till ours, God turns water into wine. That, men fail to see. Either like the Pagans they refer the process to some finite spirit, Bacchus or Dionysus: or else, like the moderns, they attribute real and ultimate causality to the chemical and other material phenomena which are all that our senses can discover in it. But when Christ at Cana makes water into wine, the mask is off. The miracle has only half its effect if it only convinces us that Christ is God: it will have its full effect if

whenever we see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party in Cana. Every year God makes a little corn into much corn: the seed is sown and there is an increase, and men, according to the fashion of their age, say, "It is Adonis, it is the Corn-King," or else, "It is the laws of Nature."

...This is [like]...the somewhat magical view we tend to take of ordinary medicine. The doctors themselves do not take this view. The magic is not in the medicine but in the patient's body. What the doctor does is to stimulate Nature's functions in the body, or to remove hindrances. In a sense, though we speak for convenience of healing a cut, every cut heals itself; no dressing will make skin grow over a cut on a corpse... if God exists, that energy, directly or indirectly, is His. All who are cured are cured by Him, the healer within. ^{iv}

Do you see Lewis' point? When Jesus turned water into wine and when He blessed the bread and it multiplied to feed thousands, it wasn't the first time He had done a miracle with those elements. No, in His actions as Creator *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing," He was also performing '*a supernatural work that was not explainable by the usual patterns of nature.*'

Why am I sharing this? It's to answer the question, "Is God still performing miracles today?" The answer is: He never stopped! In every process of nature there is also the fingerprint of our supernatural God who created nature itself!

And now for the most personal question: Are you willing to be used as a delivery system for one or more of God's miracles this Christmas? What's the purpose of a miracle? Remember? A miracle of God...

...will bring glory to God, shine a spotlight on Him!

...will accompany a message from God – it's His signature.

...will address a real human need. ^v

So, can you perform a Christmas miracle like that? Yes, you can. How? Start at the bottom – find someone with a real human need. Ask God, "What do you want me to do that will address their need, shine a spotlight on You and combine it with a personal message from You to them?" Please notice: their knowing the gift is from you is not required. Do you know someone with an emotional hurt? You don't know how to cure their hurt but you don't need to. You're just addressing their need, binding their wound. Could they use a friend? Could they use some prayer? Maybe they need a dozen chocolate-chip cookies! So, bake the cookies, bring them over, sit with your friend and talk and pray and eat. And expect that God, through your common, ordinary actions and words – will perform His miracle - meeting their need, showing Himself and speaking a personal message through your mouth. That's just one example. The miraculous possibilities are endless.

In Isaiah chapter 9, the prophet is describing the need of His people 700 years before the first Christmas. The need is overwhelming! The northern kingdom has collapsed. The southern kingdom is apostate; it's an emotional, intellectual and spiritual wreck. For eight chapters Isaiah has been describing this dark, dark scene. Then, a miracle happens! A message from God comes to him about a future rescue. Isaiah's job is not to perform the rescue but to give the people hope. He says:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun (tribe that Nazareth is in) and the land of Naphtali, (the tribe that Capernaum is in) but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Is. 9:1-2, 6-7)

Who will accomplish this miracle? Not you! The LORD Almighty will. This is the event we're about to celebrate that we call Christmas. It was miraculously predicted and miraculously accomplished by God working through common, ordinary people: a teenager named Mary and a carpenter named Joseph. They did not need special training. They did not have elite standing in society or a Wall Street banker's line of credit. They just had to say "Yes" when God came to them and said, "I want to perform a miracle through you."

God began performing miracles in Genesis 1. Creation was not a natural process, it was a miracle – "*a supernatural work of God, not explicable by the usual patterns of nature.*" He began doing miracles in Gen. 1 and He's never stopped. He wants to do a miracle this year through you. All you have to do is say, "Yes" and then He will work through you, by His Spirit, to:

- Address someone's need
- Give them a personal message from Him and
- Shine a spotlight on Himself

Say "yes" and let God refocus your Christmas. Amen.

ⁱ Al Mohler, *Words from the Fire* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), p. 38

ⁱⁱ Dr. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, 84, 85), p. 406

ⁱⁱⁱ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 25

^{iv} *Ibid.*, Lewis, p. 29

^v Dr. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, 84, 85), p. 409