

12 Miracles

‘The age of miracles is past’, people say. The Bible is full of miracles, yet they are not often seen nowadays. Why is this so? Should it be so? We need to apply the principles suggested in Chapter 2, and look at the whole sweep of the subject. We have plenty of material to work on.

Supernatural happenings seen in public are referred to in the New Testament as ‘signs and wonders’. Signs and wonders are not necessarily two classes of events. A ‘sign’ is a supernatural event which carries a message, pointing people to a particular fact. A ‘wonder’ is something which causes people to wonder, to marvel, to be amazed. Together they comprise what we would call ‘miracles’.

A miracle is something which cuts across the laws of the natural world. When someone believes in Christ and becomes a new creation, that in itself is a miracle. People also speak poetically of the miracle of spring, of new lambs, of opening flowers and suchlike. However, in this chapter the miracles about which I am writing are times when God intervenes in ways which the laws of science would not anticipate and cannot explain.

Before considering whether the age of miracles is indeed past, we need to consider what kinds of miracles were performed in the New Testament, and what their purpose was.

Jesus’ miracles

When you read the New Testament, you cannot fail to be struck by the number of supernatural happenings described there.

Jesus’ life was filled with miracles. He healed people from all kinds of illnesses. The pages of the gospels are full of instances. In particular, he healed diseases which were considered incurable. He healed lepers (Matthew 8:2-4; Mark 1:40-4; Luke 5:12-14; 17:11-19). He healed a woman who had haemorrhaged for 12 years and who could not be healed by the doctors (Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-8). He raised the dead back to life again, notably the widow of Nain’s son (Luke 7:11-16), Jairus’ daughter (Matt. 9:23-5; Mark 5:38-43; Luke 8:49-56) and Lazarus (John 11:43-4; 12:1, 9, 17). Many times over it is recorded that Jesus cast out evil spirits from people.

Apart from healing disease, Jesus asserted his authority over the natural world in stilling the storm (Matt. 8:24-6; Mark 4:37-41; Luke 8:23-5). Jesus cursed the fig tree and it withered (Matt. 21:19; Mark 11:13-14, 20-1).

The greatest miracle which Jesus performed is that he rose from the dead. A man told his friend that he had had a great idea for a new religion. How should he promote it? His friend told him, ‘Preach it far and wide, and when people get

annoyed with you, get them to kill you. Then after three days, rise again from the dead!’

The disciples’ miracles

Jesus gave the 12 disciples authority ‘to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness’ (Matthew 10:1). He instructed them to ‘heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons’ (v. 8). This did not just apply to the apostles. The 70 (72?) who were sent out were also told to ‘heal the sick’ (Luke 10:9). Jesus told them, ‘I have given you authority . . . to overcome all the power of the enemy’ (Luke 10:19).

Miracles did not stop happening when Christ ascended. As someone has said, the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ should be renamed the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’, because many works of power were accomplished by the Spirit working through God’s people.

The gift of speaking in languages you have not learned, so that native speakers of those languages can understand (Acts 2:7-11) was the first of these miracles. Then there was the healing of the man crippled from birth sitting at the temple gate (Acts 3:1-10). ‘The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders’ (Acts 5:12). These included many healings. ‘All were healed’ (v. 16) we are told. Paul in Malta prayed and laid his hands on Publius’ father and saw him healed (Acts 28:7-8), with the consequence that ‘the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured’ (v. 9).

The dead were raised to life through the apostles, as we see with Peter in the case of Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42). This was also true for Paul when Eutychus fell out of the window when Paul ‘talked on and on’ (Acts 20:9). The young man was ‘picked up dead’ (v. 9), but when Paul put his arms around him he came to life (vv. 10-12).

Paul declared that he had ‘fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ’ (Romans 15:19) ‘by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit’. He said his preaching was accompanied by ‘a demonstration of the Spirit’s power’ (1 Corinthians 2:4).

Not all miracles were positive in their effect. At Paphos Paul cursed the false prophet Bar-Jesus and brought blindness on him (Acts 13:9-12).

The gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are all of miraculous origin. They include the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues.

Hearing God speak to you personally is also something which is supernatural. This happened, for instance, to Philip. An angel of the Lord told him to go south to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26), so that he could meet up with the Ethiopian eunuch. We do not know whether Philip heard an actual voice, or whether the message came through a strong impression in his mind. Such messages occurred often (Acts 9:10-16; 10:3-6, 13-15, 19-20; 13:2 etc.) Hearing from God is also, of course, a necessary prerequisite for prophesying.

The reasons for miracles

If the New Testament is so full of miracles, we need to ask why. What was the reason behind all these works of power? These things did not happen just by chance. How did they fit into God's purpose of redemption? Several reasons may readily be discerned for them.

Alleviation

Many times in the gospels we are given the reason for Jesus healing the sick. He was concerned for the suffering of the people. He had compassion for the leper (Mark 1:41), for the widow of Nain (Luke 7:13), for the blind men (Matt. 20:34).

Jesus saw the woman who could not straighten as being kept bound by Satan, and needing to be set free (Luke 13:16). Peter declared that Jesus of Nazareth 'went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil' (Acts 10:38). 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work' (1 John 3:8).

Accreditation

One of the major reasons for miracles is that God, through these supernatural happenings, set his seal on people. On the day of Pentecost Peter describes Jesus in these words: 'Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him' (Acts 2:22). When John the Baptist in prison sends to enquire whether Jesus is really the Christ, Jesus points him to the evidence: 'The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor' (Matthew 11:5). The greatest accreditation is given by the greatest of miracles. Christ was 'declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead' (Romans 1:4).

Apostles are also accredited by the miracles which God performs at their hands. Paul refers to 'the things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles' (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Affirmation

As the gospel is proclaimed, God affirms that it is true by causing miracles to accompany the preaching. 'This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will' (Hebrews 2:3-4).

This theme appears a number of times in the New Testament. The Lord 'confirmed his word by the signs and wonders that accompanied it' (Mark 16:20). God 'confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders' (Acts 14:3).

Revealing God

Jesus' compassion for the needy shows us something of God's heart as he healed those who were suffering. Jesus himself declared the purpose behind healing the man blind from birth as being 'that the work of God might be displayed' (John 9:3). The raising of Lazarus was, he said, 'for the glory of God' (John 11:4).

When the disciples were sent out to preach and heal the heart of their message was to be 'The kingdom of heaven is near' (Matthew 10:7).

Spiritual gifts are used by God to build up both individual believers and the church as a whole (1 Corinthians 14:4).

The miracles performed in the New Testament were to show that God is both compassionate and powerful, healing the suffering and demonstrating that he has come to reign.

The promise of miracles

Paul refers to God as 'he who gives you the Spirit and works miracles among you' (Galatians 3:5, Greek). This is how we are to regard God. Jesus certainly expected that miracle-working would continue, and would even increase (John 14:12):

Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will even do greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

The end of Mark's gospel, much discussed and yet still included within the scriptures, declares that signs and wonders will accompany those who believe (Mark 16:17-18). Paul exhorts his readers to 'eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy' (1 Corinthians 14:1). He adds, 'I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy' (v. 5). 'Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues' (v. 39).

It is obvious that in New Testament times the miraculous was an integral part of the spread of the gospel and the life of the Christian.

Have they gone?

The church has historically not seen much of the supernatural. How can we explain this? In the New Testament miraculous operations were part and parcel of God's activity. This is in stark contrast to much of the church today. Church services and coffee mornings abound. People experience the miracle of new birth. God also speaks to believers to guide them. But generally signs and wonders are unknown.

Because of this state of affairs, non-Christians and modernists have expressed doubts as to whether the miracles really took place in the first century. This cynicism is expressed by a character in George Gershwin's folk opera *Porgy and Bess*:

It ain't necessarily so.

Dem tings dat you're li'ble to read in de Bible,

It ain't necessarily so.

Two possible explanations suggest themselves. One is that the church has lacked faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. The other is that God no longer chooses to work by means of the supernatural.

No one finds it comfortable to admit that they have been deficient in any way, and that they continue to be deficient. If the church has indeed lacked the power of the Holy Spirit, then the consequence is that one needs to ask how this may be restored. An easier option is to suppose that God has his own reasons for removing the supernatural from the church.

A book I was reading by a keen evangelical pointed out that there had been almost no miracles in the last few centuries. The writer gave this fact as evidence that miracles were no longer to be expected. God did not work miracles in our midst any more. If you suggested to this man that Christianity was to be determined by tradition, he would be horrified, I am sure. Yet the tradition of 'no miracles' is a fact of life for him.

The sovereignty of God

One possible reason which has been suggested for the absence of miracles nowadays is the sovereignty of God. He 'works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will' (Ephesians 1:11). Perhaps his will during the last few hundred years has been not to perform miracles.

Undeniably we see God's sovereignty in particular instances. God will not perform miracles simply because we want him to do so. We pray for healing, and sometimes we do not see it happen. Paul left Trophimus ill in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:21). We cry to God for him to come in and change situations, but he does not always respond as we would like. God is sovereign in such matters.

God is also sovereign in the way he dispenses his gifts. Hebrews speaks of 'gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will' (Hebrews 2:4). God shares out spiritual gifts, giving them 'to each one, just as he determines' (1 Corinthians 12:11).

However, there is surely a difference between what happens in particular cases and the way God works in general. After informing us through the scriptures that miracles are his way of endorsing his gospel and his servants, would God in his sovereignty change his whole method of working? After distributing spiritual gifts for building up individuals and the church, would he cause them suddenly to dry up completely? More than that, would he do so without giving notice of these things through the Bible? This hardly seems to be what we would expect, since 'the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets' (Amos 3:7).

We cannot explain all deficiencies in the visible church in terms of the sovereignty of God alone. Was it due to God's sovereignty that the gospel of grace all but disappeared before the Reformation? This was surely due to man's deficiency, not to God's intent. The absence of miracles in many parts of the church

for such a long period of time may similarly show that Christians have been out of step with God's intentions for his church, and therefore have failed to pray for miracles and to expect them.

The complete Bible

Those who consider that miracles are not for today usually suppose that signs and wonders are no longer needed. In the age before the scriptures were complete, they would say, people needed supernatural evidences. However, now we have the whole Bible, this revelation takes the place of these signs.

Such people obviously believe that there has been a phase change, like that between ice and water, or like that between the Old Testament and the New. The working of miracles has now been replaced by the provision of the whole Bible. If there were such a radical phase change, should we not be told? This idea certainly seeks to exalt the scriptures, making them more important than the working of God with power through great miracles. If the scriptures are indeed so great, we would surely expect that in them we would find a clear indication that a phase change is to be anticipated.

We are hard put to it to find scriptures which give any indication that miracles were only to be temporary. There is only one passage which seems to come near, and that is 1 Corinthians 13:8: 'Where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.' The chapter shows that love is vital, and the exercise of spiritual gifts without love is worthless. Prophecies and speaking in tongues (two of the spiritual gifts) will come to an end. It is hard to see that knowledge as such will ever end, so perhaps Paul is referring here to another of the gifts of the Spirit, the word of knowledge. But when will these gifts end? Does this refer to the completion of the canon of scripture, when all the New Testament is complete, or does it speak of a future age when we are for ever with the Lord?

If this passage in 1 Corinthians 13 is to prepare the church for the cessation of miracles (and spiritual gifts with them) when the scripture is complete, it is astonishing that no mention is made here of the scriptures. For a teaching to be established from the Bible we expect to find clear scriptures on the subject, and we expect sufficient evidence. Do you think there is enough evidence to convince you of such a significant change in God's working?

Do we need them?

In the story of Aladdin the wicked magician roams the streets offering 'New lamps for old!' Those who heard him should have smelled a rat, because it was not a fair exchange. We need to consider whether swapping miracles for the full Bible would be a fair exchange.

As far as the **alleviation** of illness, we do now have modern medicine and, in Britain, a National Health Service. Perhaps we are not so much in need of God's

miraculous activity in healing. However, there are illnesses for which medicine has not yet found a cure. There are sometimes long waiting lists. Sometimes the most important healing is not of body, but of the heart and mind. People are racked by hurts of the past. Moreover, if it is the case that our enemy the devil sends his minions into people's lives to harry them, then we still need to bring God's power to bear in casting out those evil spirits. We cannot expect such deliverance from the National Health Service. God still wants to show his love and concern for individuals in need. It hardly seems that God would stop healing people simply because he has given them the whole of the Bible.

If miracles were necessary for the **accreditation** of Christian leaders, then it is hard to see how the scriptures can perform the same task. Can a man be approved merely because he has a Bible in his hand? Even those who appear to live lives true to the scriptures may have skeletons in their private cupboards.

God gave **affirmation** of his word, confirming the good news by accompanying signs and thereby showing that this message was true. How can the scriptures fulfil this need? Is the message of the scriptures sufficient to confirm the message of the scriptures? What God promises in his word is miraculous, so signs and wonders give affirmation not just of the spoken word but also confirmation of what is written.

The scriptures are effective in **revealing God**. They show that God is loving and caring, able to help those in need. One way in which he does this is by the alleviation of illness, for example. So the scriptures point the way, but the miracles are surely the fulfilment of what the scriptures teach.

Jesus' condemnation of the Sadducees was that they knew neither the scriptures nor the power of God (Matthew 22:29). Both are surely needed. If a Formula 1 racing driver heard that you had removed his accelerator pedal, would he be reassured to know that you had at least left him the service manual?

False miracles

We need to face the fact here that miracles are not necessarily the result of God's power. The enemy, the devil, can also work wonders. Jesus spoke of false Christs and false prophets arising to 'perform great signs and miracles' (Matthew 24:24). Paul warned his readers of 'the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders' (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Those who never knew Christ will point to the 'many miracles' which they did in his name (Matt. 7:22).

Besides these miracles worked by the enemy, those Christians who believe in miracles may be unwise in their methods. They may pray for healing, and then reassure the sick person that they have been healed even though the symptoms remain. If healing does not happen, they may condemn the sufferer for his sin, or for lack of faith. In ways like this they may not be able to heal the sickness, but can leave the sick one in greater need pastorally than when they started.

The fact that a counterfeit exists, or that people may be unwise in their dealings, does not mean that the real thing does not exist. Fake antiques would not be snapped up so eagerly by the unwary if it were not for the fact that real antiques exist which are valuable.

How may we distinguish between miracles performed through the power of the Holy Spirit and those resulting from a very different spirit? One of the gifts of the Spirit is that of 'distinguishing between spirits' (1 Corinthians 12:10). Ironically, those who assert that the gifts of the Spirit have ceased and are not for us today, stand in particular need of this gift, which they claim has disappeared!

John gives us help in being able to 'test the spirits' (1 John 4:1). The key is that 'Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God' (v. 2). Do the miracles bring praise to the Lord Jesus Christ? Are they in conformity with all that we read in the scriptures about him and his working? Is their effect to reveal more of the nature of God to people?

Prove all things

There is one matter here which deserves the gravest of warnings. The Pharisees attempted to test the spirits where Christ was concerned, and concluded that his miracles were achieved by means of 'Beelzebub, the prince of demons' (Matthew 12:24). They considered the activity of the Holy Spirit operating through Christ and concluded that the power at work was that of the devil himself. Sadly, there have been evangelical believers who have been completely convinced that a phase change has taken place and that the gifts of the Spirit are no longer for today. When they have heard of such gifts being manifested they have concluded that this cannot be the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore it must be the work of the devil. Christ tells his hearers that speaking against himself is something which may be forgiven. However, 'anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come' (v. 32).

Lessons

The church has become accustomed to living without seeing much of God's power. Perhaps it has been the case that some Christians have been characterised as 'having a form of godliness but denying its power' (2 Timothy 3:5). In this situation it is easy for a church with little power to invent a theology of powerlessness. Such a state of affairs is self-perpetuating. We do not see miracles, so we produce reasons why we should not expect miracles. We see the continued absence of miracles as confirming our reasons that there should be no miracles. And so it goes on.

What we are doing by this process is developing lack of faith. When faith was lacking, not even Jesus could do many miracles (Matthew 13:58).

It has been a great cause for rejoicing that in recent years there has been more experience of the Spirit at work in the church worldwide, bringing people to new

birth, filling Christians with joy and delight, engendering love and zeal for Christ—and working miracles.

If we see from the scriptures that signs and wonders are to be expected, then this will motivate us to pray for such things to happen in our times. We will have faith that God intends to show his power in this day and age. True miracles are the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot expect the sovereign God to demonstrate his miraculous power simply to suit us. But we can implore him to make us clean and usable, to fill us with the power of his Spirit, and to display his glorious power through us.

Those who expect God to work miracles will be able to pray like the disciples in Acts 4:24-31. They addressed God as ‘Sovereign Lord’ (v. 24), acknowledging the primacy of his will and intentions. They nevertheless prayed, ‘Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus’ (v. 30). May we not ask him to do the same today?