

## Trust and Miracles

[Do you believe in miracles clip] Do you believe in miracles? That clip was from the 1980 winter Olympics when the young US Olympic Hockey team defeated the defending gold medalists and highly favored Soviet Team. It was the ultimate David and Goliath moment in sports. The iconic call you heard was the voice of the legendary young commentator, Al Michaels asking the question, “Do you believe in miracles?”

So, I’ll ask the question for real. Do you believe in miracles? Maybe I should ask first, “Do you believe that hockey game was a miracle?” Well, not technically. It was amazing. It was certainly unexpected. But big surprises don’t constitute miracles.

Now, let me ask you this question, “Do you believe in magic?” [magic trick clip] Why don’t you believe it? You know it’s a trick. We don’t know how, but we all know he doesn’t spontaneously generate frogs in his mouth. It’s not magic. It’s an illusion.

Now, I bring these up because there are many people who are on the fence about God. The famous atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell was asked what he would say to God on judgment day, he replied, “*Not enough evidence!*” Some of you might sympathize with that. But what I’ve found is that the question isn’t whether there’s enough evidence to believe in God. There clearly is because the vast majority of people in history have

believed in God. The question is really, *“What evidence will you accept?”* and *“What will you do with your knowledge?”*

And I know there are many people who would say, *“If I just see a real, undeniable miracle, then I would believe and give my life over to that God.”* But here’s the problem...it doesn’t seem to work that way. For two reasons.

For one, over time we always seem to be able to find ways to discount something that seemed so real at one point. I know a few people who at one point in their life have said they’ve experienced God personally or they’ve witnessed a miracle like a miraculous healing, but today don’t believe.

The other reason is that even if someone *believes* in God, that miracle doesn’t always result in obedience to God. For a long time, the church wanted to buy the property on the corner where we now have the office. Five years ago, there was a business there and we didn’t want to kick the business out if we purchased the property. So, we prayed that God would bless the business, and within six weeks the business tripled in size and they had to move to a warehouse, making the building available for us.

Now, the owner of the business seemed to acknowledge that God had something to do with his sudden boom and yet, it didn’t seem to change his faith commitment. The point is, we often believe that a miracle will be the turning point for faith. *“God if you just get me out of this jam, I’ll serve you forever!”* How long does that last?

But not only do we know this from experience, the Bible is clear about it, too. This is the second week of our series called, “Lessons from the Wilderness” where we’re walking through the Exodus—which is the famous event where God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. During their 40 years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, they learned a lot about God. So, we’re eavesdropping to see what lessons we can learn from them. Today, we’re going to talk about what the Israelites learned (or should have learned) about miracles and trust.

The story of the Exodus contains a bunch of accounts of what we would call miracles. God calls Moses with a bush that’s on fire, but never consumed. When Moses is concerned whether the elders of Israel will believe him, God turns his rod into a snake and then back into a rod. God convinces Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, by bringing ten plagues on them. After Pharaoh does let the Israelites go, God guides them with a pillar of fire and a cloud and when Pharaoh changes his mind, God parts the sea and they walk across on dry ground and drowns the Egyptian army.

Those are some pretty impressive signs. I don’t know about you, but it seems like it would be enough to *convince* me. But the strange thing is that they’re surprisingly ineffective. Yes, they got Israel out of Egypt, but they didn’t seem to change anyone.

So, the question we’re exploring today is, “*How could these people not believe in God after seeing all those amazing things?*” But before we get into the story, I think it’s

important to point out that the purpose of the miraculous signs wasn't to convince anyone that God exists. You would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the ancient world, who didn't believe the existence of the gods. Pharaoh believed in the gods.

And the Israelites certainly believed in God or the gods. They might have even believed that Yahweh was the most powerful God. Their temptation was never to become atheists. Their temptation was always to worship other gods. So, God didn't do the signs just to prove his existence. The signs always revealed something particular about God. Let's look at three examples of messages we see from the signs in Exodus.

The first message was *to show Egypt which God is supreme*. Did you ever think about the fact that if all God wanted was to get Israel out of Egypt, he could have posed as an Egyptian god? He could have said, *"This is Isis [or Aman Ra or Horus] let those filthy Israelites go!"* Pharaoh might have been more likely to listen, but Yahweh's purpose wasn't just to get Israel out of Egypt, he wanted *his* name to be known.

So, when God recruited Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3, Moses knew he had to go to the elders of Israel. They weren't expecting him, and it would be pretty strange for some random guy to show up and say, "I'm the new leader of Israel." So, he asked God, "Who should I tell them sent me?" He answered in verse 15, **"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."** He made that connection for Moses and Israel. When they

see Moses go to Pharaoh and all these crazy things happening, you'll know it's the same God you heard about from the stories of your ancestors.

Then we skip to chapter 5 and Moses first appears before Pharaoh and he says, **“This is what the LORD (Yahweh), the God of Israel says, ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.’”** So, if Pharaoh has many gods to choose from, Moses has to name the god who's about to unleash chaos on Egypt. It's not just any God, it's the God of the Israelites speaking.

In 5:2 Pharaoh gives his arrogant reply, **“Who is the LORD (Yahweh), that I should have to obey him and let Israel go? I do not know this Yahweh and I don't have to bother to listen to him.”** It's like when a powerful or famous person is criticized by someone less famous, sometimes they'll respond by saying, *“Hmm. Never heard of him.”* In other words, “they're too insignificant for me to even bother with.” Pharaoh was asserting his power by saying, “Yahweh? Never heard of him.” Then, to rub it in, not only did he not let Israel go, he made them work even harder than they had before.

So, Moses went back to God and said, “Yeah, Pharaoh isn't listening. Now what?” God told him to go back to Pharaoh and do it again. And notice what he says in 7:4-5, **“Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD (Yahweh).”** In other words, they'll know my name.

After the final plague Pharaoh let the people go. The Israelites traveled a while and in Exodus 14 next to the Red Sea, when Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army out to bring them back. God told them to camp right there and he says in 14:4, **“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.”**

The question is, “Did Pharaoh get the message?” The answer is “kind of.” It got the Israelites out of Egypt, but it didn’t change Pharaoh’s allegiance.

The second message of the miracles was to show *the Israelites who to serve*. If you’ve seen the movie The Ten Commandment with Charlton Heston, you’re familiar with the famous line of Moses, **“Let my people go...”** But if you don’t read the story carefully, you might miss something very important.

Charlton Heston leaves out a critical phrase. Look, for instance, in Exodus 5:1, **“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says, ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.’** But then, when he repeats it, there’s an interesting evolution. Look at 7:16, **“Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.”** Then a little later in 8:1, **“Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”** Then 8:20, **“Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”** After that, three more times he says, **“Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”**

The word translated “worship” is the Hebrew word, *abad*. *Abad* is used 290 times in the OT and 227 times, it’s translated as “serve.” It’s translated “worship” only five times! It can mean both *worship* and *serve* or *work*. To worship God is to serve God.

This is where it gets really interesting. In Exodus 1, when it’s describing the plight of Israel, in verse 11, it says **“<sup>11</sup>[Pharaoh]...put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. <sup>12</sup>But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites <sup>13</sup>and *worked* them ruthlessly.”** The word “worked” is *abad*.

In Exodus 5, after Moses went to Pharaoh the first time and told him to let the Israelites go, Pharaoh just got mad and rather than letting them go, he tightened his grip and he says, **“Now get to *work*. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks.”** The word translated as work is the word *abad*.

So, you see, God didn’t lead the Israelites out of the service of Pharaoh to do whatever they want. God led them out of Egypt so they could stop serving Pharaoh and start serving Yahweh. The message of the miracles wasn’t that Yahweh existed, or even that he was supreme, but that should result in them *servicing* God.

So far, we’ve talked about some pretty spectacular miracles—visually stunning and stress inducing. But what we see in chapter 16 is much less spectacular, but just as pointed. The third message is *for the Israelites to learn that they can trust God*.

Traveling through the wilderness will make you hungry—that’s understandable. Scholars estimate that here were a few hundred thousand traveling through the wilderness. When they got hungry and they started to think to themselves, *“Hey! Wait a minute! Where are we going to get food for all these people in the wilderness?”* They go on in verse 3, **“If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”**

After all the amazing things they saw, you would think they would have a bit more trust. But we know how that works, so God does something different. In the morning, when the dew was burned off the ground, thin flakes like bread were left on the ground for the people to eat. In the evening, quail would come down to the camp and the people would be able eat them. It would be repeated every day to provide for them.

Then look at what Moses tells them in verse 6, **“In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord.”** Here’s what I find interesting. There’s a huge contrast between the parting of the Red Sea and the miracle of manna and quail. When we think about manna, we think about an incredible miracle. But put yourself in the shoes of the Israelites.

There wasn't really anything that would have been undeniably miraculous. There's a good chance most of them had never been out in that region before so they could very easily have just thought this was a common occurrence in the desert.

In fact, some people believe manna might have been lichens that grow in that area. I tend to think it was a supernatural kind of food, but either way, the point is that it would have been easy for the Israelites to discount. But Moses doesn't just say, "in the evening you'll have a ton of birds to eat," he says **"In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt."** And he doesn't just say, "In the morning you'll see some bread-like stuff," he says, **"in the morning you will see the *glory of the Lord.*"**

Because the point is to teach, when God provides for them, he also gives them limits. It says in verse 4 that God is testing their obedience—to see if they got the message. They were to gather only what they needed for the day and don't keep any overnight, except on the sixth day—the day before Sabbath—they were to collect enough so they could rest on the Sabbath. By following those instructions, they showed their trust in God to provide. As usual, some did what God said and some didn't.

Those are three messages, God is supreme, God is the one we they should serve and they can trust God. The question is, what was the difference between those who got the message and those who didn't? Well, we know it wasn't the *evidence* itself. Pharaoh and the Israelites heard the same message and saw the same plagues, yet they

responded differently. Everyone in Israel saw the same quail and the same manna, yet some were faithful and some weren't.

They didn't *trust* just because of what they *saw*, they *saw* because they chose to *trust*. Miracles and evidence are great and even necessary. Biblical faith isn't *blind* faith. But miracles and evidence by themselves don't lead to obedience. The lesson we learn here is that there is always a step of faith involved in knowing and following God.

These three messages; that God is supreme, that God is worth worshipping and serving above all else and that we can trust that God will provide, are lessons we learn from the Israelites in the wilderness.

The truth is, there might be some here on the fence about which God is supreme—sincere people, who really want to do what's right. Is it Oprah's god? Is it the make-your-own-god of popular culture? Or is it Jesus? And you're waiting for a sign. If you could only see a miracle that will convince you without a shadow of a doubt. Well, you should learn from Exodus that no such miracle exists. Jesus gives enough evidence to believe, but not so much that you can never doubt. Faith is a decision. And when you make a decision to follow Jesus, you start to look at the evidence in a different light.

But even when we believe, we have to know that God's goal is not just that we believe, but that we will *serve* him. While we might not be tempted to set up golden calves, we give ourselves to things that aren't worth our time. Some of us give our lives to

accumulating money and things. Some of us give our lives to success in our career. Some of us give our lives to leisure and travel. Some of us give our lives to making our children happy or successful. And we think that because this is what society says is worthwhile that it's OK—and to some degree all of them are OK. But they can easily become idols. So not only do you have to answer the question, "What God will I choose to believe in," but "which God will I serve?"

The final lesson from the wilderness is that *you can trust God to provide*. That doesn't mean God will make you rich. Notice that God only gave the Israelites enough manna for each day. He did that because he wanted them to trust him daily. This is also why Jesus, in the Lord's prayer taught us to pray, "*Give us today our daily bread.*" When we recognize that every good and perfect gift comes from God, then rather than complaining about what we don't have, we can be thankful for what we do. And when we choose that attitude, there will be times when even the most mundane provisions will seem miraculous.

So which level of faith are you at? Do you just need to believe that God is there? Do you need to move from belief to service? Or do you need to walk with God as a daily act of trust? You may never get the evidence you really want, but if you make the choice, you already have all the evidence you need.