

Miracles

When I was in high school, I had a friend named Dan. Actually, he was more my sister's friend, but I knew him a little bit. He went to the local Assembly of God Church. Actually, so did I until I was in kindergarten and then we switched over to the Wesleyan Church. At the time, I didn't know much about charismatic Christians. I'd never even watched a televangelist on TV at that point. In any case, I was not a charismatic.

Well, Dan invited me to church one Tuesday night, which I should have thought was odd in the first place, because it was Tuesday night and everyone knew you went to church on Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night, not Tuesday night.

Well, I had to work that night—I was working as a fry cook at Hardees, so I told him I would come to the service when I was done with work. While I was at work, I felt a huge pain in my side, right up under my rib-cage and for the rest of my shift, I really labored to breathe. I didn't think I was dying or anything, but it was quite uncomfortable.

Well, I got off work and went to the church and looked for Dan in the sanctuary, but he wasn't there. In fact, he never showed up. But things seemed pretty exciting so I sat in the back. Little did I know it was a healing service.

I had never seen anything like this before, so I was an interested observer. I watched the evangelist on the platform calling people up to the front. There's a woman with a heart condition, come forward to be healed. A man with cancer, come forward for

healing. They would line up at the front and two guys would always stand behind the person because when he would pray for them, they'd always fall backward and lay there a while. It was pretty interesting and very strange to me.

But it was about to get stranger because suddenly I heard the evangelist say, "There's someone in the congregation that had a sharp pain in their side and it made it hard to breathe." Come forward and receive healing. Of course, at this I was freaking out. I'd read the Bible and spent my whole life in Sunday school, so I heard about stories of healing in the Bible. But it had never been personal to me. But I thought, "Well, he asked me to come forward, so what have I got to lose."

I walked forward and stood at the front as the pastor made his way down the line pushing people over. And I started praying, *"God please don't let him push me over. I don't want to go down. Don't make me go down."*

When he came to me, he asked me, "What are you up here for?"

In my head, I thought what probably most of you would think, "You told me to come up here!" He said, "What are you here for?"

I said, "I'm the one with the pain in my side that makes it hard to breathe."

So, he put his hand on my side and started to pray for me. And when he started praying, immediately, I felt a warmth come over my body, starting where his hand was and emanating from there. And suddenly my side felt better and I could breathe normally. And the most amazing thing was that he didn't try to push me over.

More than 30 years later, I still remember that day. Not because I had been diagnosed with a terminal illness or anything. In fact, my hunch is that I was probably healed of gas. A miracle? I don't know. I probably wouldn't submit it as evidence, but I do still remember it.

How many of you have had experiences like that or know of someone you trust that has? Miracles are an interesting and controversial topic. On one end of the spectrum, there are some who don't believe in miracles are possible. The person most non-believers point to today as giving the knock-out argument against miracles is the philosopher David Hume, who said, experience tells us miracles don't happen. He's also the one who developed the "Principle of Uniformity" which says the past is not different than today—so if they don't happen today, then they also didn't happen in Bible times.

Other philosophers and liberal theologians like Rudolf Bultmann have said that modern, scientific-minded people cannot believe in miracles. We're beyond that. The theologian David Strauss argued that the accounts of miracles in the Bible were just legends made up by Christians in later centuries.

Now I'm sure Hume and Strauss, if they were alive today, would be surprised to hear that two recent surveys show that a significant number of Americans claim to have seen or experienced a miracle in their lifetime. One study said 34%, the other said 38%. That's somewhere around 95,000,000 people in the U.S. alone.

The fact is that they are preconditioned to disbelieve in miracles because they believed that science shows us miracles are impossible. So, even if they saw a miracle, they always have a way to explain it away.

For instance, Strauss himself had a close friend who was paralyzed from the waist down because of a spinal condition. But a Lutheran pastor named Johan Christoff Blumhart came and prayed for him in the name of Jesus and he was healed. Strauss' explanation was that his condition had been psychosomatic. No matter how amazing the miracle, people will find a way to explain it away.

On the other end of the spectrum are people who think *everything* is a miracle and that they see miracles everywhere. It's a miracle that I got the job! Did you hear that he asked her out and she said yes? It's a miracle! They buy into every faith healer on TV no matter how much they stretch the imagination. Some people are so eager to believe in every miracle that they accept every account without scrutiny they sometimes look incredibly foolish when one is proven to be a hoax.

Some of our confusion about miracles has to do with how we use the word. When some people use the word miracle, they basically mean something happening that was very unlikely. If it's surprising or spectacular, it's a miracle.

Today when we talk about miracles, we're talking about *the supernatural temporarily interrupting the natural way of things to show that God has acted in history.*

The natural world operates by natural laws—cause and effect, gravity, inertia, etc.

There's a way things normally go. So, while the birth of a baby is amazing, it's not technically a miracle.

Science studies these natural laws. So, we use science to try to explain most events. That's its job. Nothing wrong with that. We don't want scientists always saying, *"Well, that was unexpected. It must have been a miracle!"* No. We want to try to figure things out. And, there are times when someone claims a miracle that we should be skeptical and explore other explanations before we believe it.

Now, we could talk about miracles for years, so we have to limit our scope today. So, the question we're asking is, *"Why don't miracles happen today like they did in the Bible?"* Now, this question means two different things depending on your perspective.

If you're a skeptic, this question is a challenge to a believer. You might say the lack of miracles today is proof that the Bible isn't reliable. It was written when people were more prone to believe in supernatural explanations. But like Hume and Strauss, you believe that since science can explain so many things they couldn't explain before, we can no longer accept miracles.

But if you're a believer and you're struggling with chronic or terminal illness, the question is very different. You might believe in miracles in theory, but it challenges your faith because you wonder whether God really cares. If he can do a miracle, why doesn't he do a miracle for me? And the lack of a miracle in your life is making you wonder

whether God is there and if he is, whether he cares about you. So, this is an important question for different reasons.

Now, we can speculate about miracles from a theoretical or scientific perspective, but our purpose today is to ask the question about miracles from a Biblical perspective, because this is a series of questions people have about Christianity. So, is there a plausible reason why miracles don't seem to happen the way they did in the Bible? Well, I don't claim to have the definitive answer to this question. But I do want to give you a framework for how to think about this question from a Biblical perspective.

Now, there are a few possible answers to this question from a Christian perspective. The first one I'll mention only because it's been an answer some Christian theologians have used over the years. I don't believe it's a legitimate Christian answer because the core of Christianity is the good news that God intervened in the natural world by becoming human, dying and performing the greatest miracle, being raised from the dead as the ultimate sign that we will also be raised. So, I don't believe this is a position someone can viably take and still be considered a Christian.

The second would be what we call a *cessationist* view. This view says that while God did perform miracles in the Bible, miracles stopped with the Apostles. People used to need miracles to know who God is, but today we have Scripture, so miracles aren't needed and don't happen anymore.

The third view would be the other extreme—what I might call the “name-it-and-claim-it” view. This view says that God still does miracles and he *always* wants to do miracles so if you don’t see miracles happening in your life, it’s because you don’t have enough faith. I believe the truth is somewhere in the middle.

Now, I don’t think we can say that miracles happen exactly the same way they did in the Bible. I don’t see pillars of fire leading groups of people around or seas being parted. I think there were some events and miracles that served a purpose in their time that won’t be repeated. But I do believe God can and does do miracles today.

In the Bible, miracles weren’t random events. In the Old Testament, miracles accompanied significant figures—like prophets like Moses and Elijah or to accomplish what God wanted to do in history and to validate the message and the messenger.

In the New Testament—they were signs that accompanied the message of Jesus in places where the gospel was brand-new and as an act of compassion in a day when people with chronic illnesses had no options. When a leper or paraplegic was healed, it was a sign that a new day was coming and the marginalize would be included in the Kingdom of God.

Why did Jesus do so many miracles? Well, it was to prove Jesus was who he claimed to be and to validate the Gospel to a world who had never heard it. Why did the Apostles do so many miracles? They did miracles to validate the message and the messenger in areas where the gospel had not penetrated. That’s why the book of John

calls them “signs.” Signs point people in a specific direction. And in the New Testament, we don’t see miraculous healings that aren’t accompanied by the gospel message.

I’m not sure yet what to make of this, but there are often reports of clusters of miraculous healing primarily in developing countries where the gospel is being heard for the first time and Christianity is exploding. In fact, I’ve even heard estimates that vary from 50 to 90% of Christians in China converted because of a miraculous healing. One explanation is that miraculous healing is done to expand the gospel, but it’s also done in areas where there isn’t great healthcare and it’s greatly needed.

So, why isn’t this happening in the U.S.? As I said before, many people claim to experience miracles and there are even a few instantaneous healings that are documented. So, it does happen. But I would say it’s true that it doesn’t happen as much here. The question is, “Why?”

When we think about this topic, I think it’s helpful to ask the question, “*What does God want?*” And in the end, I hope you see two things: First, miracles aren’t necessary to accomplish what God wants (and in fact, sometimes they’re counter-productive). And second, miracles aren’t particularly effective at accomplishing what God really wants.

So, what does the Bible say God wants? Most people would answer that by saying, God wants us to believe he exists. Is that true? I’d say, yes and no.

I think God does want us to believe he exists, and he’s done a pretty good job of it. Before the enlightenment, it was almost impossible not to believe in God or gods. And

even after that, most people still believe in a God of some sort who created the world. Even in the secular west, well over 90% of people believe God exists. And most of those people believe that God exists without ever having seen a miracle. So, miracles aren't necessary for most people to believe God exists.

Not only that, but from a Biblical perspective, *believing* God exists isn't all he wants. For instance, the book of James says, **“You believe in one God? Good, even the demons believe that and they tremble in terror.” (2:19)** So, if God doesn't just want people to believe he exists, what does he want? Well, according to Jesus, God wants us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves and surprisingly, miracles don't accomplish that very well. This is even true in the Bible.

In John, chapter 6 we find the story of Jesus feeding the five-thousand. Verse 1, **“Jesus crossed to the far shore of the sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.”** Jesus always drew a large crowd. And it says specifically that they followed him because of his miracles—kind of like people would with magic tricks. People love to be wowed, so they followed Jesus!

Thousands of people had been there a long time, listening to Jesus teach and they were starting to get hungry. So, Jesus tracked down a little boy and stole his lunch. Actually, the disciples asked. When Jesus got the food, he started breaking bread and just

kept on breaking it until he had enough to feed five-thousand people and even had a bunch left over. Jesus did a huge miracle for 5000 people.

Then, verse 14, **“After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come to make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself.”** So, the miracle seemed to work. They were catching on to the fact that Jesus was something special. But Jesus wasn’t entirely comfortable with it because they had their own idea of how they should follow him.

So, he pulls a Houdini and escapes from this large crowd of people who were ready to make him king. But it didn’t take long before they found him. When they did, rather than teaching them more or doing more miracles, he *challenged* them. Verse 26, **“You are looking for me, not because you saw the miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.”** So, according to Jesus, people wanted to see miracles is not because they wanted to know God, but because he filled their stomachs.

Then Jesus says something a little weird in verse 53, **“Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day...’”** Jesus was a good teacher, wasn’t he?

Jesus knows that if he just continued to do miracles, he could gain a huge crowd of people, but that crowd of people would be there for two reasons: to see the show and to

get what they wanted out of him. But he knew that neither of those reasons would produce the kind of lasting faith God really wants, because when things got difficult, miracles wouldn't be enough to sustain them. And it turned out to be true.

Verse 66, **“From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.”** Even though the crowd saw the miracles, when things got hard—when things got a little weird, they left.

But we shouldn't be too surprised by this. The story of the Bible is filled with story after story of God doing amazing things only to have people turn their back on him. In Exodus, when God leads Israel out of slavery in Egypt by doing miraculous signs, they come to the Red Sea and they get mad at Moses and said, *“What there weren't enough graves in Egypt so you had to bring us out here to die?”*

Then God parts the Red Sea, they're saved from the Egyptians and they get out into the desert and get hungry, so God miraculously gives them manna. Then they start grumbling about the lack of variety in their diet.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus is in paradise with Abraham and the rich man is in torment and begs Abraham to send someone to tell his brothers about his fate so they don't experience the same thing and Abraham says, **“If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”**

And that proved to be true because a little later, Jesus' friend Lazarus dies and he gets there about four days later and calls into the grave and Lazarus walks out of the grave—raised from the dead. Now, you would think that would be convincing, but it says that this only made the religious leaders more determined to kill Jesus.

In Acts 16, the Apostle Paul and his companion, Silas were in the city of Philippi when they came across a young slave girl who was possessed by a demon who could tell the future. The girl made a lot of money for her masters. But Paul and Silas saw that she was in bondage—not just to the men, but to a demon, so they exorcised the demon and set her free. Of course, this thrilled the girl, but it made her owners furious because they lost their source of income.

So, you see, over and over in Scripture, miracles don't produce faith in people who aren't inclined toward faith in the first place. They either want God to entertain them or to help them get what they want. But they don't want to submit to his agenda or live according to his way.

Now, you might say, "If I were alive during that time and saw the things they saw, not only would I believe, but I would dedicate my life to following God." But I wouldn't be so sure. Because what I see in Scripture is also what I see in real life today. People make bargains with God. Even if they don't really believe in God, they'll pray something like, *"OK, God if you're there, if you will get me out of this situation, I'll start going to church. I'll give my money to the poor. I'll change. I'll live differently."* And what happens? Maybe

there are a select few who follow through, but usually, they change for a little while, but in time, they go right back to what they were doing before.

Why is that? Because miracles aren't effective at changing our basic heart-orientation. Not only do we want to see God do miracles, we want him to do them on our terms. Even when God gets us out of our bind, when the wow factor wears off, we forget and explain it away. *"Well, I was really emotional at the time and wasn't thinking clearly. So, it seemed like God did a miracle, but it was actually just a fortunate coincidence."*

We all think that if we just saw more miracles, we would have greater faith, but experience tells us it's just not usually true. God uses other things to accomplish what he wants in us.

For instance, he uses suffering. Romans 5:3-4 says, **"³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."** I know this isn't the answer most of us want to hear, but we're looking for Biblical answers.

God also uses what we call *providence*, which are like miracles where God intervenes, but its usually less spectacular and usually involves our cooperation. Providence are the subtle things that God does where they are hard to see if we're not looking, but when we look at them through the eyes of faith, we can see better.

God uses Scripture. God uses other believers who invest in us.

I believe God still does miracles, but I don't believe we ought to rely on them as the source of our faith. When they come, we should receive them as a gift, but I don't believe we should always expect them. We should pray for supernatural healing, but we should also go to the doctor and thank God for the knowledge he's given doctors and nurses.

Well, I don't think I have given you the definitive answer to this question. In fact, I think there are many ways we can answer this question—and maybe I'll even have a different answer on Saturday, but I hope I've been able to help you think about it well.

I do believe God still does miracles. I don't believe they're incredibly common all the time. But I do believe that God intervenes in our lives, continually guiding us, healing us inexplicably and through other means like medicine. And I don't believe it's unspiritual or lacking in faith to ask questions when someone claims to experience a miracle. We need to be open, but not gullible because while miracles can boost faith in people who believe, false claims can turn people off.