

## Understanding Miracles

John 20:24-31, Rev 13:11-18.

### Making sense of early morning TV

Now we've all seen them on TV—particularly if you've woken up in the early hours of the morning and scrolled through the channels for something to cure the insomnia—charismatic evangelists who claim to be used by Jesus to bring healing to those who are beyond medical help; miracle workers, right there on the television!

How do we respond to this type of Christian ministry? Maybe you're sceptical of the whole thing. Tricksters who want to take your money! Maybe you're a true believer, and you think it's the sceptics who are being misled. Or maybe, like most people, you see these things and just scratch your head, not really knowing what to think about it

You don't need to see these things on TV to find yourself shrugging your shoulders. We're now coming to an end in our series in John's Gospel, and we've read of some pretty amazing miracles: water into wine; people cured of their sickness; a lame man walking again; just reading John's Gospel is enough to leave us scratching our heads! So this week I thought I would spend some time talking about miracles. We come across them in the Bible, we come across claims of miracles in various churches; what's it all about?

To help us come to an answer I'm asking three questions which are there on your sermon outline:

1. Are Miracles possible?
2. What role do miracles play in the Bible?
3. What role might miracles play in the church today?

Hopefully by the end of our time in Scripture this morning we'll feel a little more confident in our ability to make sense of what we see both in the Bible and also in our churches and on TV from time to time.

So first of all, **Are Miracles possible?** From a Christian perspective, the answer is Yes! Let me take a few minutes to explain why the Christian worldview says that miracles are a possibility. Right at the beginning of John's Gospel we read that, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus is the creator of the world. John 1:3 Through him [that is, Jesus] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. This verse makes us go back and reconsider the opening chapters of Genesis. When the world was created it wasn't just God the Father who was active, but Jesus was there too, working to create the world in which we live.

Now read through the rest of the NT and you'll find that this work didn't finish once the six days of creation were over Paul says in Colossians 1.17 that Jesus is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Not only did Jesus make the world, but—and this is vital for our understanding of miracles— he continues to uphold

the world from day to day. In other words, Jesus is involved in ongoing maintenance! His hands uphold every movement and breath of every human and animal, throughout every hour of every day. This is why it's such a shame when people say "I've got nothing to do with God and he's got nothing to do with me!" Because he's got everything to do with us! Our very life is something that he gives day to day.

And as Jesus continues to uphold the world, he does so in an orderly manner. Job 38 is a great chapter where God explains to Job all that's involved in sustaining the world. In 38:12 God says to Job: "Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, <sup>13</sup> that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it? We might think that the rising of the Sun each morning is just a product of natural mechanics, but the Christian worldview says that each rising of the sun is ordered by God. Just because the things we observe in nature form regular patterns, that doesn't mean they're merely mechanical. God is upholding the world, and he does so in a regular pattern.

I love science. One of the bookmarks on my computer is the ABC science page. And my definition of science is that it's simply *the human discovery of the regular patterns used by God to uphold the world*. Science and Christianity are not in conflict; science relies on observing regular patterns, and the Bible says that this is how God operates.

It's with this worldview that we can understand the place and possibility of miracles. The Christian worldview would say that a miracle is simply an occasion when *God momentarily changes the way in which he upholds the world*. Usually, people with terminal diseases die; that's the way God has ordered the world—he has numbered our days, he allows disease and death to have their way. But sometimes God allows a terminally ill patient to make a full recovery. That's an unusual scenario, but if it happens, that's God upholding things differently, and so we call that a miracle. So as Christians who accept this worldview, we would say that yes, miracles are possible, because our God is upholding all of creation, and he can order that creation anyway he pleases.

For many of us here today this is not something that we need convincing of. For many of us the question is not so much "Are miracles possible?" but "Where are they? Should we expect to see some?" I think if we understand the purpose of miracles then we'll be better placed to understand their use. Hence question number two: **What role do miracles have in the Bible?**

One place where Jesus speaks about the role of miracles is in last week's passage. If you remember we looked at John 5, and in verse 36 Jesus says these words: the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me. The miracles of Jesus give testimony as to who he is. Is Jesus simply a wise teacher? Is he simply an effective leader? No, the miracles would suggest that he is more than that, that in fact he is the Son of God sent from the Father.

We hear the similar things from the lips of Jesus in John 10:37 Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father.<sup>38</sup> But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” So the purpose of miracles is to help people see who Jesus is and to encourage people to place their faith in him

Again, this is not a big surprise for us. Most people understand the evangelistic purpose of the miraculous. Some years ago I was speaking to a church friend on a Sunday night and we were looking around the half empty church building and I asked “How can we get more people to come along to church?” And without missing a beat, and with absolute sincerity he said: “With a program of signs and wonders. They’ll come and they’ll believe.” And I can understand why someone might be tempted to say that. The miracles of Jesus are there in John’s Gospel to elicit belief. But I do think that there is more to the story, and that perhaps we ought not be so quick to place our trust in the miraculous as a church strategy.

First of all, have you picked up in John’s Gospel that Christ’s miracles don’t have the same effect on everyone? Again, we saw this in last week’s passage. In chapter 5 Jesus appeals to his works as evidence of his divine origin, and yet he says to the Jewish leaders in verse 40 you refuse to come to me to have life. A program of miracles is no guarantee of church success.

And secondly, miracles are *not the only testimony* pointing to Christ. If you remember from chapter 5, Jesus also speaks about the testimony of Scripture. Verse 39 You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me It’s the Bible that tells us who Jesus is. And I would even argue that when it comes to ministry strategy, there is, within the Bible, *a priority given to verbal forms of ministry over visual forms of ministry*. The characters in the Bible seems to go for words over miraculous actions.

We heard this in in our first Bible reading today. The disciples had some good news for Thomas: “Thomas, We have seen the Lord!” Thomas is a man of science, he wants to see the evidence of Jesus resurrection “Bah! Unless I see the scars on his hands and side I will not believe!” And so Jesus appears to Thomas: “Come feel where the nails were Thomas, put your hand *into* my side”. And it was at that point that Thomas believed: “My Lord and my God!”

But then Jesus says this: chapter 20:29 Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Jesus shifts the focus from belief based on seeing to belief based on hearing. The verbal report of the other disciples should have been enough for Thomas. And it ought to be enough for us too. Have a look where John goes next, chapter 20:30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.<sup>31</sup> But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John turns his attention from the belief of Thomas to the belief of his readers; to the belief of you and to the belief of me. And what does John invite us to base our belief upon? Upon an ongoing programme of miraculous works? No. He asks us to believe a written testimony, a written testimony about a *particular set* of miracles from 2000 years ago.

I think this preference for verbal testimony is all the way through the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Israelites who came out of Egypt, they were treated to an awesome visual display of God's power at Mt Sinai. But not every generation saw that. Subsequent generations made do with the testimony written down by Moses.

If there is one thing I'd like you to walk away with from this sermon it's this: When God communicates with us he seems to prioritize the verbal over the visual. That doesn't mean the visual doesn't have place—it does—but it's a place governed and explained by God's verbal revelation. And I think this is what we see with the miraculous in the Bible; miracles have a place in declaring who Jesus is, but only in a way which supplements the work of the Bible.

Ok, so this leads us to where the rubber hits the road. What might this supplementary ministry look like in the life of the church? Our third question: **What role might miracles have in the church today?** I have five expectations and two actions that might give some direction.

*1. Expect God to work primarily through verbal means rather than through visual means.*

A point I've just made but I want to say it again. Jesus' own ministry displayed a priority for the verbal over the visual, so our church culture should reflect this principle. Any church which ends up just being a freak show of wired events has lost the plot. The teaching of Scripture must remain central to our evangelistic method and central to the way we worship.

*2. Expect full healing when Jesus returns*

Miracles teach us about Jesus, but Jesus is yet to return! God only promises complete healing when Jesus appears again. So in the meantime, God may heal, but he doesn't promise to. That promise is reserved for the age to come.

*3. Expect God to answer prayers in an ordinary way.*

God might heal you with amazing acts of power, and he might heal you through the Doctor's medicine, it may not be crazy and mind blowing, but remember that we worship a God who upholds the world in an ordinary way, and he might just use ordinary means to answer your prayer. Another point to remember is that some answers to prayer are actually more miraculous than what we realize. Every time someone comes to faith it's a miracle; an act of God. Ordinary does not mean that the Holy Spirit is absent.

*4. Expect the gift of healing to not always work.*

Yes, God does give gifts of healing to people, but no, they don't always work when they're exercised. The apostle Paul was able to do many miracles. He even raised people from the dead. But he couldn't heal his friend Timothy from his stomach ailments, and he couldn't heal himself from his thorn in the flesh (physical ailment of 2 Cor). Sometimes the gift works, other times it doesn't.

*5. Expect false miracles*

We heard this in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading. Revelation 13 speaks of an evil beast who was given power to perform great and miraculous signs in order to try and deceive God's people. Just because amazing things are happening, that doesn't mean that you should get sucked in by them. Whenever you see something, you should always ask yourself "Is this from God, or is this from a deceiving Spirit?"

To work it out, you need to look away from the miracle and you need to listen to the teaching that comes with it. Why? God works primarily through verbal means. Sometimes people will show me YouTube clips of some preacher performing a miracle. And they'll ask me "is it real?" I've got no idea! You can't tell from a video. But you don't have to work out whether it's real or a trick, you just need to listen to the message that accompanies it. If the message, in all its detail, is not substantiated by the Bible, then don't give another thought.

The other kind of false miracle is that some people just lie. They make stuff up because they want attention. Don't waste time trying to prove or disprove what they say. Instead, try and move them from the visual to the verbal. Ask them "What does this confirm of what we know of God in the Bible?" and then if they give a good answer say "praise God!" and leave it at that.

So practically before anyone starts dealing in miracles, these are the expectations that we need to have in place.

If God is indeed powerful and if miracles can have a secondary place in church life, then I also suggest two positive steps we can take. First of all, pray. Put your belief in God's power to work and ask him to intervene in a situation. If you're sick, then gather some people around you and ask God to heal you. The apostle Paul speaks about the gift of healing in his letters and if such people are among us, then this is one way they could emerge. We may see that when some individuals pray, people tend to get healed. I don't think it's a guarantee that we have a healer in our midst, but we may have and possibly will not know unless we're more active in prayer. Of course the answers to those prayers might come in ordinary ways; "The operation worked, the trial drug was a success, praise God."

Secondly, testify. If you pray and God does heal you, then tell others about it. The reason we tell others is that miracles are there to teach us about Christ, that he is real and active in the world and that he has authority within it. So encourage others with your story. Tell your small group, tell the church. I would love to have some testimonies in church that tell of God's miraculous hand in people's lives. And the purpose of this testimony would not be to then say "And God is going to heal everyone", but to simply say "We worship a living and active God in this place. Won't you continue to put your trust in him?"

And then after the testimony is finished, we'll go back to the verbal preaching of the Gospel. Why? Because that's where the real power for ministry lies. Paul writes in Romans 1.16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Miracles have a place, but not ahead of the verbal announcement of Jesus in the gospel.