

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

6 What Is a Miracle?

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25; Acts 2:22-24

Almost two thousand years ago a Jewish maiden entered those mysterious depths we call motherhood and returned with child. The uniqueness of this event lies in the fact that her son was without human father, at least this is what orthodox Christianity has claimed since Mary's child was born so long ago. Listen to the way it has been stated in an early creed, "Being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance, so that two whole, perfect and distinct natures, the Godhood and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person without conversion, composition, or confusion, which person is very God and very man, yet one in Christ, the only mediator between God and man." (The Savoy Declaration of Faith, 1658) The Scripture references for this belief are Luke 1:27, 31 and 35.

Christians have long believed that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. Anyone can read the story as it is beautifully told in Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:25-56. It is all there; how the angel came to Mary and explained the mystery; how Mary agreed to become God's special vessel through which a redeemer could come; how Joseph, the man to whom she had been betrothed, was told the news of Mary's pregnancy; how Mary shared the information with her cousin, Elizabeth. There is no effort on the part of Scripture to prove that these things were so. We have the account given just as you would expect anyone who is telling the truth to write. The passages mentioned have solicited belief that Jesus Christ is God incarnate or in flesh form for centuries.

Our concern with the birth of Jesus the Messiah lies in the fact that it was a supernatural birth. We can use the adjective supernatural because it was different from the birth of any other human being who has ever lived. Virgins do not give birth to infants, but that is what Mary did. We are accustomed to calling such things which are not supposed to happen by our standards, miracles. Any meaningful study of the Christian faith will have to consider the miraculous before going very far. Unlike other religions of the world, Christianity stands or falls with its miracles. At the point of the deity of Christ and His resurrection from the dead, Christianity becomes exclusive and defends its truth with

supernatural verification. An understanding of the subject of miracles is important by virtue of the fact that Scripture abounds with them. Logic demands that they are either lies, legends, or historical happenings. If they can be proven to be the former, the veracity of Scripture is immediately undermined and the authority with which the Bible speaks would be lost. Our attitude toward miracles goes a long way toward shaping our attitude toward Jesus Christ and Christianity. Biblical supernaturalism, based upon sufficient evidence, is worthy of a genuine and responsible act of faith, modern antisupernaturalism in the form of secularism, atheism, and naturalism notwithstanding.

Because of the influence of these secular views upon our lives, miracles pose a special set of problems for many people in their investigation of the Christian faith. Without begging the question, let us just say at the outset that miracles do not have to be explained, they actually need only to be verified. The question here is whether or not the witnesses and recorders of such events are trustworthy and reliable. The question is really one of historical investigation rather than of scientific inquiry. The fact that we may not be able to understand what happened is beside the point because there are many things which happen outside the confines of our understanding. Having made these comments let us continue in our investigation of Biblical supernaturalism by stating the following principles.

I. A MIRACLE IS A DIFFERENT RATHER THAN A GREATER MANIFESTATION OF POWER:

In order for us to grasp the nature of miracles in terms of a Christian perspective the following definition may be helpful. A miracle is “an extraordinary visible act of divine power, wrought by the efficient agency of the will of God, through secondary means, accompanied by valid, covenantal revelation, and having as its final cause the vindication of the righteousness of the triune God.” The best way to appreciate this definition is to observe that it conveniently gives itself to three areas of thought which concern our lives.

First, a miracle is an extraordinary visible act of divine power. It is divine power, God's power, which originates the miracle. The word “extraordinary is important because it suggest a different manifestation of power which is already operative around us every day of our lives. All of the phenomena which gather up to describe life itself are a cause for wonder. Trench, in his **Notes On The Miracles Of Our Lord**, p.8, writes beautifully, “All is wonder; to make a man is at

least as great a marvel as to raise a man from the dead. The seed that multiplies in the furrow is as the bread that multiplied in Christ's hands. The miracle is not a greater manifestation of God's power than those ordinary and ever repeated processes; but a different manifestation." If you are willing to grant the power of God, being operative in the on going of the universe, it should not be that difficult to allow God to manifest this very same power in a different way as He should so desire to employ His power. To say that miracles are not possible is saying that the kind of God who fashioned a Red Sea to begin with is not the same kind of God who is able to arrange a passage through it. The fact that God exhibits His power in a way that does not fit our concept of the way He normally manages nature should not deter us from believing such a thing can happen. God broke the pattern when Joshua had a long day, Egypt was plagued, Jonah was delivered and three men survived a fiery furnace.

II MIRACLES ARE A KIND OF LAW WITH WHICH WE ARE NOT FAMILIAR:

When it was stated that miracles are an extraordinary manifestation of divine power, the issue was placed squarely in the realm of "theism," belief in a rational, personal, and supernatural being capable of such acts. Now, the matter falls into the lap of the scientist with the words, "through secondary means." Scientists object to miracles on several counts. Miracles are not experienced, miracles offend natural law, and the universe in which the scientist operates is hostile to miracles. The Christian position is that miracles have and do happen. Providential miracles are a special ordering of the manner or timing of a particular process. The Philippian earthquake in Acts 16:26 is an example of this, as is the draught Elijah experienced in I Kings 17. Christians have experienced God's providential miracles in answers to prayer in unlikely and remarkable ways.

The standard belief by the scientific community is that miracles really never occurred at all. The explanation of supposed miracles is that **(1)** the witnesses are unreliable, **(2)** what was thought to be miraculous can now we explained as naturalistic through advanced scientific understanding, and **(3)** natural process varies from time to time in method and rate of operation and miracles are a rare instance of such variation. Miracles, therefore, can be explained in terms of natural law because that cannot be violated. Natural law is the way the scientist explains reality according to his observations. For the Christian, natural law is the way God has elected to order His universe. Man's view of the regularity of the universe is that of "law." A better word for the Christian is "will." For the

Christian the mechanical order of things is not so much law as it is the mind and will of God operative before his eyes. In Hebrews 1:3 we read that it is Christ, the Logos, who upholds the universe by the word of his power. Colossians 1:17 teaches that Christ is before all things and by Him all things hold together. Natural laws are not absolute in themselves if you believe that Christ actually does these things. Natural law is man's way of describing how He works. Should He desire to work in a way other than we are accustomed to, natural law is not broken, it is simply included in a broader natural law which is at this point beyond our understanding. Miracles are law-abiding acts of God and do not offend science. Given enough time the scientist may discover the broader law or new factor which is introduced by miracles.

This can be illustrated by the natural law of gravity. It is a law we are familiar with. At one time or other we have all experienced a fall of some kind. Unless there is something to hold us up, we will fall down. What goes up must come down, that is, unless a broader law can somehow be introduced that will temporarily supersede the original one. When an airplane flies through the sky we do not say that it has broken the law of gravity. We have come to understand that another law, the law of aerodynamics has come into effect which, for the moment, is a higher law than that of gravity. When the airplane runs out of fuel or malfunctions the original law of gravity will again take over. Miracles are like that. They do not break natural law, they employ another factor which we do not understand just as there was a time when we did not understand the law of aerodynamics.

III. THE MIRACLES OF SCRIPTURE SERVE REDEMPTIVE PURPOSES:

It is very important that miracles be viewed from a redemptive perspective, in the words of our definition, "accompanied by valid, covenantal revelation, and having as its final cause the vindication of the righteousness of the triune God." When we approach miracles as an academic exercise of science or history we throw them all out of focus and misrepresent them. Miracles served a purpose in their habitat of Scripture. Obviously, it would be much easier to believe in a Bible without miracles, but would such a Bible be worth believing in? The Christian teaching for centuries has been that the miracle authenticates both the message and the messenger. If human nature is not that trustworthy, what comparable way shall be found to authenticate a message than by supernatural verification?

- 1. Miracles Happened to Verify Scripture or Special Revelation.** Miracles are not like the tricks of a magician. They did not happen as a matter of entertaining people. They were sensible presentations to the eye, ear and, mind of certain beholders and one purpose was to substantiate teaching as having come from God.

The exhibition of miracles seem to characterize certain periods in the Bible which have to do with God's redemptive purpose. **First**, the deliverance of the nation Israel from Egyptian bondage and the establishment in Canaan by Joshua. (Exodus: 4:1-5, 7:9; Joshua 3:15-17, 10:12-14) God accompanied the words of His servants with the display of supernatural power. **Secondly**, during the time of struggle between God's ways and the heathen in the lives Elijah and Elisha. (I Kings 18:36-39; II Kings 5:14.-15, 6:6) **Thirdly**, when in exile the people of Israel saw the power of God demonstrated. Here we see the Hebrew children spared in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace and Daniel in the lion's den. (Daniel 3:25-29, 6:16-17, 18-22) A **fourth** cluster of miracles took place during the introduction of Christianity and the time of Christ. God, who had spoken in sundry times and in divers manners in times past by the prophets, was now speaking to the world through His Son. The miracles of Christ and His disciples were necessary in order to convince people of their divine mission. The wonder working God thus confirmed those who spoke for Him. (Acts 2:43, 6:8, 8:5-7; Matthew 12:38; 11:2-3; John 5:36, 14:11) These Scriptures are indicative of the fact that miracles took place as a sign of God's attestation and proof of the genuineness of the revelation being given.

- 2. Jesus Christ Was to Be Recognized as Savior by His Miracles.** Important verses here are John 5:18-19, 36, 10:24-25, 37-38, 2:11, 14:11; Matthew 9:1-6; Acts 2:22 makes it very clear, *"Ye men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did by Him in the midst of you as ye yourselves all know."* What Peter was telling them was, "You can know that Jesus is God's Son by the miracles He performed." These miracles of Jesus ought to insist that we recognize Jesus, among all men who ever lived, as God's unique Son. Let us also remember that God brought His resources to bear in providing a unique Savior for us, our attention can be focused upon a specific miraculous deed in the formation of the infant Jesus in the womb of a virgin. Clearly, He was born as no man has ever been born, His was a miraculous birth. He took His human nature from one of our sisters, but He is unlike us because

of a miracle.

- 3. Miracles Ought to Compel Us to Consider God Very Seriously.** In Romans 1:20 Paul writes that the things of God can be known through creation, that it is inexcusable not to take God seriously every time the sun rises and sets. The miraculous ought to press us toward understanding that the supernatural is there, that there is more to this ordered universe than natural law. God confronts us with the miracles in Scripture to shake us from our lethargy and to drive us to Himself. Everyone of us ought to ask himself, "What is my attitude toward miracles?" Are the witnesses unreliable? Would additional information show these things to be natural occurrences only appearing to be supernatural? Where do I stand? Have I made up my mind about Jesus at this point? Have the miracles of God served their purpose in my life by convincing me that God's revelation in Scripture is true and that Jesus is a true Savior? I suppose we shall all have to answer these questions for ourselves.

I want to conclude by mentioning what has been considered to be God's greatest miracle of all. Greater than setting the flaming sun in the sky, or bringing people from their grave, is the miracle of spiritual regeneration, of the new birth. The Bible puts it this way, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (II Corinthians 5:17) Ephesians 2:1-3 speaks of the unregenerate man as dead, driven and drifting. Nothing short of a miracle is sufficient to arrest a human being from this condition. Fascinating, that the greatest miracle of all can take place in my life when I swing wide the door of my heart and invite Jesus into my life as Savior and Lord. It is wonderful to take part in a miracle, the miracle of the transformed life. This is a miracle in the true and fullest use of the word.

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