

# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT **MIRACLES?**



In discussing the theme of biblical miracles, several important areas of consideration must be surveyed.

First, exactly what is a miracle? People use that term rather loosely—frequently, not at all in a scriptural sense. And what are those tell-tale traits that identify the miracle and distinguish it from a natural phenomenon? If folks only knew what to look for in certifying the miraculous, they surely would be aware that supernatural deeds are not being performed in this age.

Second, what was the design of those “wonders” which are described so dramatically in the Bible? And how did those demonstrating these “signs” come to possess them? Further, does the Bible itself contain any information as to whether miraculous displays would be perpetual, i.e., until the end of time, or whether they were to be confined to a relatively brief span of history?

Finally, if genuine miracles are not a part of today’s world, just how does one explain the feats which are flaunted by so-called modern “faith-healers”? These are questions which we propose to answer in this study.

## **Definition and Classification of Miracles**

How does one define a miracle?

A miracle is an event which the forces of nature—including the natural powers of man—cannot of themselves produce, and which must, therefore, be referred to a supernatural agency (Fisher 1900, 9).

A miracle is a divine operation that transcends what is normally perceived as natural law; it cannot be explained upon any natural basis.

The miracles recorded in the Bible fall into several categories. The following examples are illustrative, though certainly not exhaustive:

First, there are supernatural acts of creation. Certain creation activities were accomplished by the word of God (Hebrews 11:3); he merely spoke, and it was done (Psalm 33:9). Obviously, this type of divine action is not being duplicated today since the creation process of the material universe was concluded at the end of the initial week of earth’s history (Genesis 2:1-2).

Second, there were miracles which involved a temporary and localized suspension of laws regulating nature. Jesus calmed a ferocious storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23-27), and, on another occasion, he walked upon the waters of the lake (John 6:16-21).

Third, there were signs which involved the healing of man's physical body. The blind were made to see (John 9:1-7), and the lame to walk (Acts 3:1-10).

Fourth, there were signs demonstrating divine power over death. Lazarus, dead four days, was raised (John 11:43-44), and, of course, the resurrection of Christ is the very foundation of the Christian system (1 Corinthians 15:16-19).

Fifth, some of the wonders of the New Testament age had to do with the expulsion of demons that had entered into human bodies (Matthew 12:22ff). This was evidence of the fact that the Savior's power was superior to that of Satan.

Sixth, the exhibition of divine authority was seen in the manipulation of certain material things. Christ turned water into wine (John 2:1-11), and multiplied a lad's loaves and fishes, so that thousands were fed (John 6:1-14).

Seventh, miraculous power was demonstrated in both the plant and animal kingdoms. Balaam's donkey spoke with a man's voice (Numbers 22:28), and the Lord Jesus, in an object lesson relative to the impending destruction of Jerusalem, destroyed a fig tree with but a word from his mouth (Matthew 21:19). In this study, we will limit ourselves mostly to a consideration of miracles recorded in the New Testament record.

## **Characteristics of a Genuine Miracle**

What are the traits of a genuine miracle, as opposed to feigned signs? Consider the following facts.

A supernatural display of divine power is not an arguable proposition; it is a dramatic, **demonstrable fact**. No where in the New Testament is there a record of a divine spokesman arguing for the validity of miracles. No logical scheme is needed to establish such a case. Miracles either happen, or they don't.

When Jesus performed signs, even his enemies did not deny the effect of such; they merely attempted to attribute his power to some other source (e.g., Satan; cf. Matthew 12:24). The leaders of the Jewish community did not doubt that Peter and John had performed a notable miracle when they healed the lame man at the temple; rather, they sought to mute the sign's impact by threats of violence (cf. Acts 4:14ff).

Is anything being done today of such compelling nature as to elicit this type of reaction?

In biblical times, miracles always had a **worthy motive**. Signs were not done for the purpose of personal aggrandizement. Though Jesus' miracles established the validity of his claim of being the Son of God, that designation was not assumed out of personal interest. Rather, the documented claim was motivated by a love for man's salvation.

Those performing wonders in the first century did not do so for the purpose of enhancing themselves financially—unlike the wealthy “faith-healers” of today. When Peter encountered the lame man of Acts 3, he had no money (v. 6).

As a general rule, the miracles of the Bible era were done in the presence of a multitude of **credible witnesses**—even hostile observers. When the Lord multiplied the loaves and fishes, possibly some ten thousand or more people were present (cf. John 6:10ff). Truly, the signs validating Christianity were not “done in a corner” (Acts 26:26).

Genuine miracles were not slow, progressive processes; rather, they produced **instantaneous effects**. Note: “[A]nd straightway he received his sight” (Mark 10:52); “[A]nd immediately his feet and his ankle bones received strength” (Acts 3:7).

In the New Testament, one never reads such statements as this: “Paul prayed for him, and within three weeks he was cured.” Yet, such testimonies are common among the devotees of modern charlatans.

True miracles must be subject to **sense perception**. The water that Jesus turned into wine could be tasted (John 2:9); Thomas could feel the prints in the hands of the resurrected Christ (John 20:27), and the restored ear of the high priest's servant could be seen (Luke 22:51). The wonders of the Bible were objective demonstrations, not subjective speculations!

Actual signs must be **independent of secondary causes**. By this we mean there must be no possible way to explain the miracle in a natural fashion.

One is reminded of the boy whose cat gave birth to kittens. When the lad noticed the kittens were blind, he prayed for them. Sure enough, in about nine days they all could see! Hardly a miracle.

Can the miracles of Christ be explained in any natural fashion? They cannot. For instance it cannot be argued that the blind man of John 9:1ff was psychosomatically afflicted, for the gentleman had been born in that condition. How can a perfectly restored ear, that had been amputated, be explained by current processes (Luke 22:50-51)?

A genuine miracle will generate more than a **superficial and temporary interest**. It will have an abiding effect. The miracles of Christ were never denied during the apostolic age, nor even in the immediate ages beyond.

Even ancient enemies of Christianity, like Celsus and Porphyry, admitted that Jesus did certain extraordinary deeds; they suggested, of course, that it was mere "magic." Their charges, however, are indirect testimony to the supernatural works of Christ. But who can remember a single "miracle" that Oral Roberts or Jimmy Swaggart is supposed to have performed?

We submit, therefore, that so-called modern miracles do not meet the criteria suggested above. They thus must be rejected and explained upon some other basis.

## **Miraculous Gifts: Their Purpose and Method of Reception**

What was the purpose of miracles in the ministry of Christ, or in the apostolic age? As noted above, their design must be consistent with the lofty theme of redemption.

Of the early disciples who were endowed with spiritual gifts, Mark declares:

And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the signs that followed (Mark 16:20).

The function of the signs was to **confirm** the revelatory process, i.e., the word of truth being communicated from God to man.

The writer of Hebrews argues similarly. He declares that the message regarding the “great salvation,” which at the first had been

spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard; God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will (2:3-4).

Of special interest in these passages is the term “confirm” (Grk. bebaioo). The word denotes evidence that establishes the validity of the divinely-given word (Brown 1975, 658). The supernatural gifts of the primitive age, therefore, had as their design the establishment of the credibility of Christ and his spokesmen, and so ultimately, the validation of their message, namely, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world!

Now observe this very important point. If it can be established that those early miracles do corroborate the testimony of Christ, and those commissioned by him; and further, that the recording of these events in the New Testament was designed to perpetually accomplish that function, then it stands as demonstrated that the repetition of such signs is not needed today.