

MIRACLES DON'T HAPPEN ANYMORE – DO THEY?



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Have you ever heard anyone try to explain why the church in the current day doesn't seem to experience nor be able to perform miracles as in biblical times? Where is our Moses who with the power of God could lift his arms and the sea parts and enemies are defeated or our story for today where the disciples could point to a lame beggar and say, "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth I command you to walk" and the lame are healed? Why as 21st century disciples can we not do those things?

I have heard the explanations and perhaps you have as well. I have heard that the power of the Holy Spirit was stronger at the time it was unleashed than it is today. I have heard that somehow, we don't have the same faith or that our faith is broken and that is why the disciples could do miracles and we cannot. Yet there are still those who look at people like Benny Hin and say that he is performing miracles while others would argue that this is a lot of hype and he is getting rich doing it.

I remember my first church of call in Greene County, Indiana where I was part of a ministerial association. Occasionally one of the pastors in this association would declare that a miracle happened in their church or as a result of their prayers. The rest of the pastors would look at the miracle performing pastor through a veil of suspicion. None of us wanted to believe that God's favor had been more on this pastor or in his church than in ours.

This leads to our topic for today that miracles don't happen anymore, do they?

Let's begin by looking at our text together to see what we can discover. Note that our text begins after the disciples Peter and John had gone to the temple for prayer and discover a lame man being carried in. The lame person was in the habit of asking for alms (I think of current day people standing on the corners with signs asking for help). Peter responds saying, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" and the man was healed. This is where our text for today begins from Acts chapter 3:

¹¹ While he (speaking of the healed lame beggar) clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. ¹² When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though Pilate had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

¹⁷ "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out,

This is the word of the Lord, let our thanks be to God.

Here is one of the miracles of the bible. Some things to note about this miraculous healing:

- it was in a public place where several witnessed it,
- it happened to a person that everyone knew was lame,
- Peter offered a teaching that affirmed Jesus as the 'Author of Life' that went along with the healing,
- the healing is offered as an opportunity to right creation by people turning to walk a new way (repent/metanoia).
- we learn that miracles offended the Jewish leaders who then arrested Peter and John. However, due to the miracle 5,000 persons came to believe. This act continued to establish God's reign.

Which continues to raise the valid question: Why don't we experience today the miracles we read about in the New Testament? Wouldn't it affirm Jesus as the 'Author of Life', would not healings encourage people to walk a new way, and would it not continue to establish the reign of God among us?

Scholars differ on this subject depending on who you read. So let's look together what people of history and also people of today have to say on the subject of miracles.

Rev. Dr. Tim Keller, co-founder of The Gospel Coalition, says that the primary function of miracles was to testify to the authenticity of God's messengers who brought God's revelation to humanity.

Per Keller, "miracles lead not simply to cognitive belief, but to worship, to awe and wonder. Jesus' miracles were never magic tricks, designed only to impress and coerce. Instead, Jesus used miraculous power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead. We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order." Keller continued by saying, "The miracles of the early church served an immediately relevant purpose in redemptive history: verifying the authenticity of God's revelation

and signaling the coming of the new eschatological age among God's people."

This speaking of the natural order of things we hear from a historic theologian as well.

Augustine said in City of God, one of his writings from the 5th century, that Christians must not teach that miracles are events which run counter to nature, but rather that they are events which run counter to what is known of nature. Augustine said that there are higher laws of nature which will always remain unknown to humanity. Augustine also wrote, "Miracles are no longer permitted to continue in our time lest the mind seek visible things, and the human race should be chilled by the customariness of the very things whose novelty had inspired them."

Luke Timothy Johnson, who is a current day catholic theologian, reminds us that God "is constantly active within the world that God brings into being at every moment". The church is God's means to reveal God's mystery and the miracles we may see. As Christians we are to imagine the world imagined by scripture listening and watching for the manifestation of God's work in situations of joy, crisis, grief and trauma.

There was an article published recently in the New York Times by Ross Douthat that spoke of miracles. Douthat wrote about why the meritocracy have obstacles to faith and religion. He defines two immediate obstacles that he sees:

- a tension between this worldview and the 'thou-shalt-not', 'death-of-self' commandments of biblical religion that is filled with judgment, and
- the meritocracy is trained in scientism, which regards strong religious belief as fundamentally anti-rational, **miracles as superstition** and the idea of a personal God as so much wishful thinking.

While our faith is entirely built around the miracle of God raising Jesus from the dead and Jesus' ability to walk with his disciples and others post his resurrection, I have my own issue with the miracles that some claim these days. To get to my point, I first need to share a story.

My mother struggled with cancer in her later years. At one point it got so bad that she made the decision to cease all treatment and was admitted to a hospice center. I visited my mother daily. One day I noticed that my mother seemed very alert. She was supposed to be taking morphine for her pain. I discovered that my mother had been fooling the nurse by pretending to swallow the morphine but when the nurse left the room, she spit it out. She showed me a drawer full of morphine tablets. I asked her if she was in pain and she said no. I called the doctor who stopped her morphine. My mother continued to improve and by that fall we were sitting in a hospice center putting up peaches when we realized that she should just go home. The cancer that was ravaging her body had stopped.

Many, many people called this a miracle even wanting my mom to give testimony in the church and in cancer recovery groups, but my mom would not as she felt guilty. She questioned why God would spare her when there were so many mothers with young children dying of breast cancer. My mother would say, "where is their miracle?" My mother would have gladly died if God would have given even one young mother with young children the 8 more years of life she received.

You see, I can understand the meritocracy that Ross wrote about. I do see and hear what they see and hear which can block people from religious faith and unfortunately the claiming of miracles is one of them.

While my mother nor I had a medical explanation of why my mother's cancer stopped, we both refused to buy into what we felt was flawed Christian thinking that somehow God found my mother worthy, or she somehow had earned a miracle when so many other wonderful people died.

Did I get to enjoy the companionship of my mother for an additional 8 years, yes and for that we both remained grateful. I continue to enjoy the miracle of creation and all good news that gets shared of an incredulous and miraculous nature, however, what I don't believe in is a capricious God that grants some an exit from pain while allowing others to suffer and die. A God that would give this one a miracle and that one not.

Miracles don't happen anymore, do they? What I know is that the living God, the God we worship and serve, will continue to manifest God's presence and power within creation. Whenever the invisible God becomes visible, and whenever the omnipresence of God is localized, this is God's Shekinah Glory. I know that God is still making God's presence known in our world.

I also know that the church ought to be the place where God's continuing self-revelation is discerned, celebrated, and embodied as theologian Luke Timothy Johnson said.

While I continue to feel blessed when I hear the wonder of an amazing event or be inspired by someone's story and will, as your current pastor, celebrate miracles with you, I want to be careful that we do not offer to people a capricious God that can become an obstacle to faith. The church's greatest gift and its mightiest challenge is to declare God's self-revelation within the world that God brings into being, the One from whom creation originates, and the One in whom creation is ordered.

Let us pray: We continue to be grateful to You, O God, for the miracle of life that we have in You. Help us to be open in every moment of every day to be open to Your presence. We are grateful to be in relationship with the One who has authored our very lives and continues to know us intimately. Amen