

# **MIRACLES AND FAITH**

## **A Biblical Understanding**

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## **Acknowledgments**

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# MIRACLES AND FAITH

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## **List of Acronyms and Abbreviations**

ca.	“circa” (means “approximately”)
cf.	“see further the following reference”
cp.	“compare with the following reference”
e.g.	“for example”
f	“read also the verse right after the one listed”
ff	“read also the next few verses”
i.e.	“that is”
Illus.	“the following is an illustration”



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I am the LORD, the God of all mankind.  
Is anything too hard for me?

Jeremiah 32:27<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the benefits of being believers in Jesus Christ is that we have access to the Lord of the miraculous, the One who can and does do great things. There is no limit to His power and ability. He who created the heavens and the earth by speaking them into existence is not limited in what He can do. God's power is great, unsurpassed by anything we can imagine or think. If there is one thing the Scripture is very clear about, it is God's ability and wonder-working power to work in miraculous ways contrary to the normal course of nature.

Yet, today there exists much confusion and disappointment on the subject of miracles. Many denominations, churches and movements hold conflicting views of this potentially divisive subject.

For some, miracles are meant to bolster faith. To them, supernatural intervention is a normal, everyday occurrence. Others wrestle with the reality that God sometimes does not seem to directly intervene in our affairs. Is their faith too small? Some feel that to not acknowledge miracle stories is to box God up and that to deny miracles or attribute a miracle to Satan is tantamount to blaspheming the Holy Spirit. "Let God be God!" is their cry! Are we to believe *every* story? Is it always wrong to doubt?

Others discount or simply ignore most modern miracle stories as being fabricated stories akin to Christian "myth" or "legend". Yet, there are many who long for miracles but just don't ever experience a bona fide supernatural experience for themselves.

There is more than just a theological argument at stake. Our perception of spiritual reality is at issue and this affects our perception of all of life. What role does the miraculous play in everyday life? How does it affect our faith? How do we understand God's ways, when He is silent?

Many have suffered spiritual "shipwreck" in their faith over these things-- either overwhelmed with guilt or disillusionment with God. This issue, therefore, affects our prayers, our faith and our very confidence in God.

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<sup>1</sup> Bible references are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

This short booklet is intended to explore a Biblical perspective on what true miracles are and the relationship between miracles and faith in the life of the believer. To begin, let's look at a few examples from both scripture and contemporary reports.

### ***Biblical examples***

In the scripture, when Jesus performed miracles, there was absolutely no denying the validity of them, in fact, no one could deny them. And His miracles were clearly departures from the normal working of things in the natural world. Observe the following examples:

1) In the garden of Gethsemane when the mob was about to take Him into custody, Jesus clearly performed a supernatural miracle that could not be faked and it was witnessed first hand by many:

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"Had it not been for the miracles, there would have been no sin in not believing in Jesus Christ."  
Blais Pascal: *Pensees*.

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*And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And He touched the man's ear and healed him. Luke 22:50*

All four gospels record this incident (though only Luke, a doctor who was given to such medical observations, records the healing part of the story).

2) Consider also the raising of Lazarus:

*When He had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." John 11:43-44*

Again, there were first hand witnesses who could validate the event. This was not psychosomatic or a resuscitation, for the man had been dead for four days. And the miracle was obviously independent of the man's faith. Even his sisters did not really believe Jesus could raise their brother from the dead.:

3) Yet, at times, Jesus did connect a person's faith to the healing process. To the women with the "issue of blood" who in faith reached out and touched His garments:

*He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." Mark 5:34*

### ***Contemporary testimonies***

God is still a miracle working God. Miraculous stories today abound. Some even say there is fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the sense of Joel's



prophecy. But, clearly, not all of what is being reported is divinely miraculous. Consider the following cases.

- An athletic teenage boy suddenly experiences acute abdominal pain while snowmobiling deep in the woods. A long trail ride out of the woods only increases the pain and the parents are beside themselves over what the problem is. The two hour car ride over bumpy roads to the hospital aggravates the problem greatly. Prayers of faith abound while emergency surgery is conducted. The burst appendix is removed and shortly after the young man fully recovers.
- A father of five is dying of cancer and given only a few weeks to live. Much prayer goes up and a year later he is healthy with no trace of cancer.
- A report is given about a man caught in a landslide and subsequently buried under a pile of rocks. Some Christians pray for him with the result that the man shoots up through the rocks 30 feet in the air and lands on his feet. When it was all over he had only a few scratches on his face.
- A discouraged, lonely young man in a wheel chair goes repeatedly to healing services only to come away feeling guilty and defeated over his lack of faith.
- The camera scans the audience of a large rally as the announcer explains excitedly that a row of people sitting in wheel chairs are jumping to their feet in faith praising God and giving Him the glory.

What are we to make of these stories, how can we sort them out? I would like to make three assertions: God *can* perform miracles today, God *does* perform miracles today and there are many *counterfeits* that obscure the *real* working of God.

## WHAT IS A “MIRACLE”?

### *Definition of a miracle*

C.S. Lewis wrote: “Miracles in fact are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see.”<sup>2</sup> While all of creation is a miracle in that it reflects the supernatural work of our Creator God, we need to have a workable definition of a miracle distinct from a general term for all of creation. Otherwise, there is no point to talking about miracles!

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<sup>2</sup> God in the Dock, 1942

What, do we mean when we use the specific term “miracle”? We discover through a study of scripture that three terms are found together three times, all related to our subject at hand:

*God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will. Hebrews 2:4 (cf. Acts 2:22, 2 Corinthians 12:12)*

The meanings of these words are as follows:

- |            |                     |  |
|------------|---------------------|--|
| “Signs”    | Grk: <i>semayne</i> | “Distinguishing mark by which something is known.” Or “event contrary to usual course of nature.” Normally translated “sign”. <sup>3</sup> |
| “Wonders”  | Grk: <i>terasim</i> | “Omen, wonder”. Always with <i>semayne</i> .   |
| “Miracles” | Grk: <i>dunamis</i> | “Deed or work of power”  |

These three words are complementary descriptions of the same thing. Therefore, we can formulate a working definition of a miracle:

*An act or event contrary to the normal course of nature that is distinguished by unusual power and which points to or identifies something or someone and causes the observers to be amazed.*

Some significant implications arise from this definition. Miracles are not simply *interpretations* of events. For example, suppose I pray for money and an extra large tax return comes back. As a faithful believer in God I give Him the glory and thank Him for this--but He worked through quite natural means. That is, God used His ordinary, usual methods. This is not “miraculous” in the Biblical sense in that the money simply came from a source we had overlooked. Certainly, the unbelieving world would not see that as noteworthy or unusual. However, we interpret the event to be evidence of God’s hand. To use the term miraculous for a case like this would water the term down to include just about everything that happens.

Suppose, for example, I pray for snow in Haliburton because I am going there to ski and it happens! Snow comes. It may have been God’s plan for it to snow anyway or He may have changed the weather pattern originally planned specifically because I prayed. Either way, He worked through the normal course of nature. A meteorologist would not have noticed anything unusual.

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<sup>3</sup> *These definitions are from A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, by Walter Bauer, trans. by Arndt and Gingrich, p. 747.*

## ***What is the difference between God's "natural" working and His "miraculous" working?***

A miracle has to do with that which is exceptional not that which is "natural" or "normal". Unfortunately, many Christians fail to embrace the fact that God is involved in all of life, even that which seems normal to us. Things of nature normally happen in an orderly predictable fashion--science simply describes it. God is involved in every detail of experience and happenings:

*He is before all things and in Him all things hold together.* Colossians 1:17

A miracle occurs when God breaks with His normal processes to get our attention. Consider the following examples of the difference between God's normal working and His "miraculous" working:

*Normal:* Earth rotates on its axis

*Miracle:* God stops it for a time (Josh 10:12-14)

*Normal:* Man born blind can't ever see

*Miracle:* *Jesus made the blind to see* (John 9:1-8, esp. 9:32)

*Normal:* Death is irreversible

*Miracle:* *Jesus raises a man from the dead* (John 11:43-44)

A miracle then, to use the word precisely, is *an undeniable, verifiable exception to the normal course of life.*

The question naturally rises: "*Why does God break from the normal into the miraculous?*" He is certainly free to work in normal patterns and He is certainly free to work in exceptional ways. He could have designed life such that miracles were common place. However, they would no longer be miracles, they would be normal! What then is God's purpose in making exceptions to His normal workings? First, let's look at the biblical history of miraculous activity.

## **THE BIBLICAL HISTORY OF MIRACLES**

### ***The Periods of Miraculous Outpourings***

*Creation.* In this unilateral event God broke with eternity past and used processes (in creating something out of nothing) which are not "normal" for today or presently observable. He was simply "beginning" to work in time and space (Genesis 1-2).

*Exodus.* The first great outpouring of the miraculous in history came with the calling out a special nation. Man had sinned in the beginning and continued his rebellious ways. The Lord began to provide a way of redemption, by calling out one man, Abraham. To this man, God made a promise to reach the world through his descendants (Genesis 12).

In the Exodus (ca. 1450 B.C.), God fulfilled His historic promise by bringing those descendants out of Egyptian slavery (under Moses' leadership) and forming them into a nation in their own land (under the leadership of Joshua). The ten plagues were very prominent during this time along with the later other miracles performed at the hand of Moses and Joshua. The purpose of these miracles clearly was for signs of judgment and destruction proving that the Lord God of the Jews was greater than all the so-called gods of the Egyptians. They showed that God really was acting on the part of Moses, Joshua and the new nation (Ex. 3:20). Whereas before God was working in individuals, now He was beginning to reach the world through a nation, which ultimately would produce the Savior. This is strategic in prophetic history.

*Pre-captivity period.* After more than 800 years in the land, God began warning His people of coming judgment (just prior to 600 B.C.). Israel, through whom God desired to reach the world, had been fully established in the land but they continually sinned despite repeated admonitions. God called them to repent or they would be sent into slavery again. This exile would be a major change in God's program. They needed to know God meant what He said!

Many miracles were performed during this time period at the hand of Elijah and Elisha. The purpose of these supernatural events was clearly to warn of coming judgment. God graphically warns Israel that they will lose their role as the "favored" ones. In fact, Israel did disregard the Lord's warnings and were subsequently sent into captivity.

*First Advent of the Kingdom of God.* Though Israel was eventually returned to the land after 70 years God planned to reach the world through a new covenant written on the hearts of people (Jeremiah 31:31-33). He sent His own Son to set up a heavenly kingdom on earth. This was a radical departure from God's working in the Old Testament.

There was a great outpouring of miracles during this time, the main instruments being Jesus and the group of apostles. The purpose of these miracles was to verify and authenticate this new working of God through the Messiah in the world, resulting in people coming to faith (e.g., John 20:30-31). Christ and His heavenly kingdom were rejected and He ascended back to heaven. God sent His Spirit to establish the Church, His intervening program. Though initially composed of believing Jews, the Church was ultimately made up of mostly non-Jews. The apostles continued to demonstrate powerfully God's new movement in the world. These demonstrations of power, though, faded in the biblical record as the new program of grace was fully established.

*Second Advent of the Kingdom of God.* There is a future day when Christ will be coming back to set up His. Again, this new working of God will be heralded

ahead of time by miraculous, supernatural occurrences through the two witnesses of Revelation 11.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Some Observations About Biblical Miracles***

- The vast majority of biblical miracles fall into the above time periods. Certainly miracles occurred at other times than mentioned above but those instances were somewhat isolated.
- Great outpourings of miracles accompany periods of radical change in God's program of dealing with His people and reaching the world.
- Clearly, the miracles serve to focus attention on the divine authorship of those historic/spiritual upheavals. When God completely changes His program, in kindness He provides miraculous evidence to substantiate that He is behind it all.
- In every case (except for the beginning) there are either two individuals or groups of human instruments involved.
- In every case (except for the beginning) hardened people, who refused to believe, were present.

## **THE PURPOSE OF MIRACLES IN NEW TESTAMENT**

Since the Lord does everything for a purpose, it is therefore important to understand His reasons for miracles. Fortunately the scriptures make these reasons very clear.

### ***Authentication of Jesus***

Jesus Himself revealed the purpose behind His miracles, namely they authenticated His identity as the Messiah. Early in His ministry He quoted Isaiah 61 where healing the blind was given as a credential for the Messiah:

*The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor' ... and He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'* Luke 4:17-19, 21

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<sup>4</sup> *The tribulation period immediately preceding the millennial kingdom will see great miracles of wrath and judgment (Rev 4) but these are not specifically performed at the hands of godly men. Even so, these accompany a huge change in God's program.*

John the Baptist languishing in prison began to doubt but Jesus presented the evidence, His miracles, as credentials to the suffering prophet:

*When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, He sent His disciples to ask Him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."* Matthew 11:2-6

To the those who challenged His authority He was very terse in explaining His miraculous works:

*The Jews gathered around Him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me..."* John 10:24-25 (cp. John 14:11)

Miracles were the proof given by the Apostles at Pentecost that Jesus was who He said He was:

*Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know.* Acts 2:22

Every miracle had the purpose of revealing who Jesus was, that is, the Messiah, the sovereign Lord. For example:

- Healing the blind (John 9:1-41) shows Jesus' ability to heal spiritual blindness.
- Healing the leper (Matthew 8:2-4) demonstrates Jesus' power over sin.
- Walking on water (Matthew 14:22-33) proves Jesus' sovereignty over the elements.
- Raising the dead (John 11:1-57) points to Jesus' ability to give life.

Furthermore, belief was to come as a result of first-hand evidence not popular opinion. Jesus often told people not to tell or spread the news of His miracles. For example:

*... [Jesus] gave them strict orders that no one should know about this ...*  
Mark 5:43

The miracles He did simply authenticated Him as the Messiah, the Son of God. Faith was required to take a person from authentication to conversion to Christ. This was a major point in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Seeing a

miracle will not *cause* a person to believe! To the rich man who wanted someone to come back from the dead to convince his brothers to repent, the response was:

*...if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets (i.e., the Word of God), neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead. Luke 16:31*

Miracles do not produce or sustain faith. Some followed Jesus simply for the miracles but left when the teaching got tough! (John 6:2 and 6:66.) Miracles simply grab someone's attention and point them toward Christ.

### ***Authentication of the Apostles***

When Jesus sent the 12 disciples on a preaching tour He equipped them with the ability to perform miracles that would demonstrate their authority. Clearly this ability was limited at that time to that particular preaching tour.

*He called His twelve disciples to Him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness ... These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions ... As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Matthew 10:1,8*

According to Peter's speech and his quotation from Joel's prophecy in Acts 2:17-21 miracles were to accompany the ushering in of the last days. The apostles were to play the key role as agents of the Holy Spirit. Even though not all of Joel's prophecy was fulfilled because of Israel's continued rejection of the Messiah and the apostolic message (vss. 19-20), the initial outpouring of miracles had begun.

Miracles continued to confirm the ministry of the apostles:

*"The things that mark an apostle--signs, wonders and miracles--were done among you with great perseverance." 2 Corinthians 12:12 (cp. Hebrews 2:4)*

Paul, the writer, identifies miracles as evidence that he was an apostle. Now if anyone could perform these supernatural works then this would not constitute specific proof of apostleship. The work of the apostles was to authoritatively bring truth to God's people as they usher in the great mystery of the Church age. Since the New Testament had not been fully written yet, God used official spokesmen who were eyewitnesses (which included the 12 apostles plus a few others such as Paul). To impress upon people this authority, God endowed them with a special ability to perform miracles (see Acts 14:3 and 15:12).

*... This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will. Hebrews 2:3b-4*

We understand “them” to be the ones to whom the message of salvation first came, that is, the “official” witnesses. A study of the word for “witnesses” (i.e., *martures* in the Greek) in the book of Acts identifies them as the apostles. Miracles authenticated the ministry of the apostles.

A cursory study of the book of Acts shows that miracles were predominately associated with the apostles and the Biblical record shows them to have faded toward the end of the apostolic period.

### ***Some Observations of Miracles in the New Testament***

Despite the relative concentration of miracles during this time period, the evidence nevertheless suggests that miracles were not the norm during the time of Christ and the apostles. Consider the following:

- Jesus did not heal everyone (e.g., in John 5 where Jesus healed only one of the many sick or infirm people at the pool of Bethesda).
- Jesus did not create food all the time--just twice (at the feedings of 5000 and 4000). See Matthew 12:1 where He and the disciples gleaned grain in the field instead of creating food miraculously.
- Peter was delivered from prison by an angel (Acts 12:3ff) but James was martyred (Acts 12:1-2).
- God raised up Paul when he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20), but not Stephen (Acts 7)
- Peter raised Dorcus from the dead (Acts 9) but did not raise Stephen from the dead (Acts 7).
- Paul, despite praying in faith, was not healed from his thorn in the flesh (II Corinthians 12:7).
- Paul recommended that Timothy take a little wine for the stomach's sake and apparently did not encourage Timothy to pray for healing (I Timothy 5:2).
- Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletus (II Timothy 4:20).
- Paul did not calm the storm (Acts 27).

In conclusion, each miracle in the New Testament had a purpose related to God and His work. They were not simply blank checks to fulfill the wishes of His people. The ministries of Christ and His apostles were authenticated by supernatural events. These events were exceptional rather than the norm. God at times works contrary to His normal workings in order to communicate certain truths about Himself. The biblical record shows they were fading out during the apostolic period.



## MIRACLES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>5</sup>

Almost all Biblical scholars recognize that historically the miraculous gifts eventually ceased sometime after the time of apostles.<sup>6</sup>

From the second to fourth centuries there were a few isolated, difficult to attest cases, the most notable of which was a cultish way called Montanism. These were followers of a converted cult worshipper named Montanus and two prophetesses named Maximilla and Pricilla who left their husbands to follow him. Given to fanatical extremes and new revelations beyond what the apostles taught, this group was ultimately branded heretical by the early church.

Other than Montanism and a few obscure, difficult to substantiate citations by Irenaeus, this time period saw little in Christian writings concerning miraculous gifts.

The Medieval period (just prior to A.D. 1500) was devoid of any significant reports about miraculous manifestations. A few obscure reports do come to us but their veracity is questioned.

The Reformation period (1500-1700's) brought a resurgence of reports claiming the miraculous. Groups such as Camisards, Jansenites and Shakers claimed to speak in tongues, but little is really known or verified.

In the Post-reformation period, Edward Irving (ca. 1800's) claimed to "demonstrate the miraculous", but was also guilty of false doctrines such as denying the sinlessness of Christ. Again, very little has been substantiated.

At the turn of the 20th century, an outbreak of the "miraculous" at Azusa Street Mission occurred on April 17, 1906. This is considered the beginning of the Pentecostal movement. However, these reports are contested and are by no means beyond doubt as to their veracity. This was followed by the Charismatic movement of the 60's and 70's and the "Signs and Wonders" movement of the 80's and 90's (also called by some the "3<sup>rd</sup> Wave" of the Holy Spirit). Concerning these last two phenomena, much has been written and many people today claim first hand experience of the miraculous. Our comments below will address these more current reports.

In conclusion, when we consider the historical record, there is very little substantial evidence of any outpouring of miracles. While it is true that, history does not "prove" doctrine, suffice it to say that we cannot substantiate any overwhelming occurrences of miracles from the time of the apostles until the

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<sup>5</sup> *This historical material can be found in most books on church History.*

<sup>6</sup> *While some attribute this to the spiritual decline of the church and the rising institutionalism, i.e. bishop's office, we have seen above this has been because their need for authentication of apostolic ministry has faded away.*

present. Therefore, we need to turn our attention to the present day situation in a time when we can witness and discern such things for ourselves as first-hand witnesses.

## **MIRACLES TODAY**

### *God's real work today is obscured*

Despite the absence of substantial reports of supernatural events up to the present century, God is still able to work in ways contrary to His normal methods in nature. Yet, I believe the authentic is submerged beneath the counterfeit and a barrage of second and third hand accounts that offer no proof or evidence of their integrity.

There tends to be “Christian gullibility” in believing stories told by preachers or a “friend of a friend”. Thus, many believe counterfeit miracles, while the real work of God often goes unnoticed because of its lack of hype and sensationalism. Popular “religion” often distracts from the real, solid work that God is doing.

Let’s look again at the story told above of a man who was buried under a landslide. Reportedly some Christian friends prayed and the earth began to shake. The body of the man shot up through the rubble 30 feet in the air and he landed on his feet next to the praying Christians. And the man only had a few scratches on his face! Sounds miraculous doesn't it?

Many stories, like this, are believed with very little substantiation. Scripture mandates “Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (2 Corinthians 13:1). This story was told by a reputable person. Upon questioning, however, he admitted he had not witnessed the event, but he heard it from the preacher at his church. Further questioning revealed it was a visiting preacher. Moreover, the preacher had not really observed the event but heard about it from someone else at the previous church he had visited. Obviously I, as the end “hearer” of the story, am so far removed from being an eyewitness that there is little reason for me to accept this story as credible.

If a story cannot be substantiated in a Biblical way we have no basis for accepting it as true. This does not mean that we are accusing the conveyor of the story of lying. We are just saying it has not been proved in a scriptural manner. (One wonders that if the story were true why the man had scratches on his face--was God not able to heal the scratches as well?).

Christians need healthy skepticism in the face of counterfeits. One should ask “Did you personally witness the miracle?” Or “Was it really miraculous?” Some say this questioning is sin or lack of faith. Or they considered it blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29) to not believe that a story really happened the way you heard it.

This reveals a misunderstanding of what it means to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. This sin was possible only when someone attributed the works of Jesus to Satan. These very works were the evidences that substantiated who Jesus was: the Messiah, the Savior of the world. This sin is also said by Christ to be an unforgivable sin. Clearly, the only way that is possible today is to deny Christ completely. That is a far cry from questioning someone's miracle story.

Wasn't Thomas rebuked for doubting the greatest miracle of all time--the resurrection (John 20:24-29)? Jesus did tell him to "stop doubting," but not before offering proof of His resurrection! In fact, He relieved Thomas' doubt by offering substantial evidence; He appeared to Thomas and invited him to touch His [Jesus'] hands and side. The Lord does not attribute evil to the desire for evidence, if done with a sincere, discerning heart.

Now, Jesus did not really rebuke him. After all, Thomas was an apostle and was to be one of the official witnesses of Christ. This required that he be a first hand witness. Notice how important this qualification was in replacing Judas:

*Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection. Acts 1:21*

Judas would not settle for anything less than a first hand personal witness. This event has to do with saving faith in the resurrected Christ not with a miracle story of someone else's healing. Jesus alluded to this in His upper room prayer:

*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message ... John 17:20*

Where does this leave us today who are not eye-witnesses of the resurrected Jesus Christ? Our faith depends upon the validity of the first hand witnesses of the resurrected Christ. We have been given their first hand testimony and the Lord invites us to believe through their witness. The Apostle John in his first letter used empirical, first-hand evidence to lend credibility to his testimony:

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. 1 John 1:1-3*

Nowhere in Scripture are we called upon to blindly believe someone else's miracle story except those miracles recorded by God's appointed witnesses of the New Testament. Peter insists upon this in his second letter:

*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 2 Peter 1:16 ... there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies ... many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. 2 Peter 2:1-3*

When the Lord worked miracles in the Biblical record they could not be refuted. The evidence was thoroughly convincing: Separated ear replaced instantaneously, the dead raised, the man born blind made to see (without medicine), a leper made well instantaneously. These were verifiable, observable miracles.

Does God do miracles like this today? We must test the stories that we hear with the biblical standard.

### ***Analysis of “Miracles” Today***

What do we make of the many sensational reports of the miraculous today? There are a number of explanations, but first a few observations are in order. Many reports of so-called “miracles” today are second or third hand stories. Much is “experienced” vicariously through the TV. These are non-verifiable, so we suspend judgment (that is, we have no basis for accepting them as factual).

Some “healings” are silly things like healing of one leg which is longer than the other as a warm up to a healing meeting (a phenomenon that anyone can fake). Some are “naturally” occurring phenomena (like healed ulcer, headaches gone away). Some cancer goes into recession, which has been the cause of many premature proclamations of healings. We do not deny God’s hand in the “natural healings” of our body; however, these things happen to non-believers, as well. As theologians say, God’s “common” grace indeed extends to everyone.

Some “healings” are psychosomatic. The placebo effect is a well-known phenomenon that the belief that something may bring healing can at times bring healing. Such, I believe, may explain the use of such things as “prayer hankies” or touching the TV set while the healer prays.

Some reports and occurrences are just plain untrue. I personally know of a woman who went repeatedly to healing services. She would throw aside her crutches in a desperate burst of faith. People rejoiced as she walked onto the stage, but she always went home disappointed and in continual pain. Once again her sincere “burst of faith” enabled her to walk without crutches for a few short minutes under the adrenaline flowing influence of the faith healer and the emotionally frenzied crowd. However, this “miracle” was short lived. The emotional yo-yo she experienced was devastating to her spiritual life--she lived in constant discouragement and guilt over the thought that she did not have enough faith. Everyone else thought she was healed.

Some situations are outright deceptive. The Buffalo (N.Y.) Evening News article contained an expose' of a faith healer who would line the front of the auditorium with wheelchairs. When healthy people came in late for the rally they were ushered to the front for "extra" seating, that is to the wheelchairs. At one point in the service the preacher asked the audience to stand as an act of faith that God was going to heal them of what ever their ailment was. The TV camera scanned the entire crowd standing to their feet, giving extra exposure to "handi-capped individuals" leaving their wheelchairs behind. The people who had been sitting in the wheelchairs in the live audience knew nothing about the TV commentator's excited proclamation of the Lord's power to heal even those in wheel chairs.

Of these purveyors of false experiences, the Apostle Peter is scathing:

*In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. 2 Peter 2:3*

The Apostle Paul agrees and makes the case even stronger:

*For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 2 Corinthians 11:13-14.*

Finally, and we must not forget, some miracles are authentic and come from the hand of our loving heavenly Father. These cannot be explained away. To list examples here would be tantamount to presenting 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> hand stories—the very thing we have been addressing this booklet. Below is a story of a first hand account of a real bona fide miracle. But, first a question may arise.

### ***Doesn't God still need to authenticate His message today?***

Some might feel that there is still a need to authenticate the message of God. To this we answer, God's word has been authenticated!

*This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will. Hebrew 2:3-4*

It *has* been authenticated by the early witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is, the apostles. The question is do we accept the testimony of these witnesses (see also I John 1:1). Though we ourselves are not eyewitnesses, we have something far more certain for ourselves. Peter speaking on behalf of the other witnesses said:

*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His maj-*

*esty. For He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 2 Peter 1:16-19.*

In other words, the Word of God carries the power and authority of God Himself more surely than seeing with our own eyes. The Word having been confirmed by the apostles is now self-authenticating:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4:12*

## **THE RELATIONSHIP OF MIRACLES AND FAITH**

What role does faith have in relationship to miracles today? Some feel that if only they could witness a miracle, then their faith would be bolstered. This belies an erroneous view of faith. The writer of Hebrews clearly asserts:

*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1*

If you can see it, then faith is not needed. In other words, a person who claims to see many miracles is not necessarily one who has great faith. To see a miracle does not require faith at all, it requires simply to open one's eyes and observe! Deep faith has the abiding ability to exist completely apart from the experience of miracles.

For some, miracles are the means to validating their faith and that God is really there. Unfortunately, this is tantamount to demanding God to prove Himself to us, otherwise we will not believe. Jesus addressed such demands:

*Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Matthew 12:38-40*

Even raising the dead will not bolster or bring about faith in unbelievers. And the same is true for believers. The story of the rich man and Lazarus confirms this:

*If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead. Luke 16:31*

At times God does miraculous things as a result of faith, but our faith in God cannot be dependent upon whether He does those miraculous things. In fact, a deep, abiding faith is required to endure and rejoice in the absence of God's supernatural intervention than to walk by the sight of frequent miracles

The great "Hall of Fame" of faith in Hebrews 11 contains those who maintained faith despite not ever seeing the results of their faith:

*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. Hebrews 11:39*

### ***Is Faith A Requirement for Miracles?***

Though we have seen that one can be faithful, yet not experience miracles, we must ask, "Is faith a requirement for seeing miracles?" First of all, we must recognize that many people were healed *without* the exercise of faith. For example, Lazarus who was raised from the dead in John 11 was obviously dead and could not believe. The demoniac in Mark 5 exercised no faith when Christ cast out the demons.

It is true that many people were healed in connection *with* their faith. However, their faith was in Jesus' *ability* to heal, not in the certainty that He would heal. None were healed as a result of "claims" for healing. They were not so arrogant as to demand it. Take for example the centurion in Matthew 8 who related faith to authority and humbly expressed his unworthiness for being in the presence of the Lord.

*The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following Him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.' Matthew 8:8-10*

Jesus commended this faith by a non-Jew as greater than He had seen in all Israel. Also consider the Syrophonecian woman in Matthew 15:21-28 who related faith to humbly seeking God's mercy. Jesus responded "You have great faith! Your request is granted." She recognized she had no right to healing as a Gentile. We have no claims on His healings; God does not owe us anything. What we receive from God is completely by His grace and we accept it if we are to "grow in grace" (II Peter 3:18).

Furthermore miracles are not things that God owes us. Someone might ask, "What about Matthew 9:20-22 concerning the woman with the issue of blood?"

Jesus said, “*Your faith has made you well.*” Yes, faith can be intricately involved, but it is God that makes a person well. Jesus is using a figure of speech to convey that her faith was the means God used to heal her. This, though, does not mean that God always responds to faith in the same way.

However, we can miss the experience of God’s miracles through our lack of faith. In Nazareth:

*He could not do any miracles there except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them. And He was amazed at their lack of faith.* Mark 6:5-6.

### ***Does It Matter How Much Faith A Person Has?***

It is not the *quantity* of faith that matters, but the *quality* of faith and the *object* of faith. When the disciples were having difficulty casting out a certain demon. Jesus answered:

*I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move<sup>7</sup>. Nothing will be impossible for you.* Matthew 17:19-20

Faith is not measured in quantities, for even “small” faith (as small as a mustard seed) can produce great things. Clearly, Jesus' point is that it is not the *quantity* of faith required but the *quality*. When we say “quality of faith” we mean a deepening understanding of the object of our faith, that is, the person of Christ. As we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord we begin to know more of what He is like, His desires, His heart. Our prayer requests become more in line with His will. This is what it means to grow in our quality of our faith.

And Jesus said, “... everything is possible for Him who believes.” (Mk 9:23). This is not a single isolated act of faith, but a way of life. Therefore, when we ask the Lord for something, we ask in His will.

*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us-- whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of Him.* I John 5:14-15

### ***What Role Should Miracles Have In Believers Lives Today?***

It seems from our study of scripture that we should not be preoccupied with miracles. What we *should* make a big deal of is lost souls won to the Savior!

*Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.* Luke 10-20

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<sup>7</sup> "Mountain moving" was a proverbial statement for doing the impossible.



There is much spiritual and psychological danger in being obsessed with miracles. Many suffer shipwreck or discouragement because even though they hear so much about miracles, they do not have first hand experience of the miraculous in their Christian experience. I remember a noon-time Bible study I was involved in years ago as a young Christian. The leader had a congenital health problem that left him confined to a wheelchair. Everyone in the study group diligently prayed for him and he kept going to healing meetings. All were believing God for a miraculous cure. As the young man continually came away from such meetings without a miraculous healing, discouragement and a sense of failure encompassed the group, especially the one who was the subject of their prayers. He was devastated. No one said it but the blame was on his lack of faith!

A catch-22 situation results. If a person does not claim healing then he is seen as a doubting Thomas, a person of little or no faith. If he does assert faith, his lack of healing “proves” he was not faithful enough! Automatically, anyone with a physical ailment or handicap intrinsically lacks faith!

This can lead, in some cases, to fairly ridiculous situations. One fellow who was part of the same Bible study group claimed to be healed of his asthma. Even when his symptoms continued, he kept claiming healing with the caveat that the devil was trying to destroy his faith by imitating the asthmatic symptoms!! What is the point of being healed if the person still retains all the symptoms!

Some go along “play-acting” while burying the guilt of their deception. Still others who are very confused over the whole issue live with a sense of spiritual inferiority. And many begin to doubt God’s love and care or His sovereignty.

The words of Hebrew 11 ring out for all those who never experience God’s miraculous intervention--their place is in God’s Hall of Fame of Faith. It takes great faith to endure and rejoice in the midst of unfulfilled expectations and unresolved difficulties.

How can we apply all this and still believe in a miracle-working God? First of all it is important not to be side tracked by that which is false. One of the devil’s best tactics is diversion and confusion. Therefore, a few guidelines to help us in our Christian walk:

1. *Get close to God--walk by faith, not by sight.*
2. *Believe God can do miracles. He is able. Ask Him to do the impossible.*
3. *Don't be preoccupied with miracles.*
4. *Don't presume upon God or make claims on Him.*
5. *Believe and trust Him that He will do what is right.*
6. *Take Jesus' own attitude: “Not my will but thine be done.” (Luke 22:42)*
7. *Praise God for the miracles you do experience or observe.*
8. *Don't fret when He is silent. Those are great opportunities for growth in faith.*
9. *Don't blindly believe every miracle story you hear.*

10. Don't hesitate to ask penetrating questions of any miracle story.
11. Don't limit God by just looking for the sensational
12. Don't judge another's spirituality by the presence or absence of miracles.

## A PERSONAL MIRACLE

God has done a miracle to which I am a firsthand eyewitness. Let's go back to our definition stated above. A miracle in the Biblical sense of the word is:

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When asked, "Why do you believe in miracles?" Henry Drummond replied: "Because I see them everyday in the changed lives of men and women who are saved and lifted through faith in the power of the living Christ."

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*An act or event contrary to the normal course of nature that is distinguished by unusual power and which points to or identifies something or someone and causes the observers to be amazed.*

The miracle I experienced was something our Lord explicitly stated was impossible for man to do (Matthew 19:26) and totally contrary to nature. It involved unusual power and points to the wonderful grace of our Lord. In the truest sense, God raised me from the dead!

In the fall of 1972 someone shared with me the way of salvation and I came to believe that Christ died for my sins. I was raised from spiritual deadness to new life in Christ. He saved me and gave me a whole life. This was greater than any of the miracles He performed while walking on the earth, being one of greater works He promised:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father. John 14:12*

I am a first hand witness to this miracle. Others may hear my testimony, but they are first hand witnesses of my new life in Christ and fruit of the Spirit resulting from this new life. Is this any less a miracle than healing a paralyzed man? Jesus poignantly asked the question:

*"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Luke 5:23-24*

Further, Jesus brought the point home when He spoke to the rich young ruler who turned away from following Christ.

*Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Luke 18:25*

Since the time of my conversion to Christ, I have had experiences in my walk with the Lord that seemed contrary to nature. It may be that if I researched some of these experiences they might prove to be perfectly “natural”. However, since I believe God is intrinsically involved and working in all of life, both the “normal” and “not-so-normal”, I don't worry about the difference.

It is enough to acknowledge Jesus Christ in all of life believing He is in control and will do all things for His glory, whether in the normal fashion or miraculous. I will offer myself through faith to Him and place no claims on Him--so that He can freely use me and work through me. Praise to Him who is able to do all things!

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Ah, Sovereign LORD,  
you have made the heavens and the earth  
by your great power and outstretched arm.  
Nothing is too hard for you.

Jeremiah 32:17

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