

Miracles . . . What? How? When?

by Thom Ernst

Many speak of the miraculous but have no thought of including God. It'll be a miracle if . . . the vernacular of the word miracle has deteriorated into something far out of the ordinary or highly improbable – yet possible. Those aren't miracles, or are they?

It's always a good practice, when entering into discourse to make sure everyone involved is on the same page; hence, the need to define our term: "Miracle". According to the Oxford Dictionary: A miracle is "an extraordinary and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore attributed to a divine agent." A secondary definition became necessary as the definition deteriorated to include everything that could not be readily explained. That definition is in widespread use today. Reflect on just a few:

Miraculous recovery; Miracle Cures; Miracle Weight Loss products; the Miracle of Flight. Let's consider the last one in more detail. On December 17, 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright successfully flew four separate flights at Kitty Hawk. So phenomenal was this event that it was labeled by many as the miracle of flight. However, it wasn't a miracle, at least not by our primary definition. It was a miracle by the second more popular use of the word: "A remarkable event" or "An exceptional product". The Wright Brothers flight can be explained by the Law of Aerodynamics. This law, as long as it is operational, supersedes the Law of Gravity. Neither one negates the other – they are still there and function within their parameters. If you're flying in an airplane and that plane loses its engines, the Law of Gravity now supersedes the Law of Aerodynamics, it may well be a miracle if you survive. True miracles cannot be defined or reproduced by laws. That is what makes miracles unique.

If that is the definition, then what is the purpose of miracles? This is where the waters become muddied. When we talk about purpose, are we speaking of God's purpose and the miracles He has initiated through His people? Or are we speaking of the ability of false prophets to perform signs and wonders aka miracles. Yeah, it goes from crystal-clear to swamp in a hurry; therefore, it's not simply determining the purpose of miracles but determining the motive of the one performing the miracles.

First on the "clear as crystal" side, miracles are not for entertainment. Nor can miracles be produced at will. The religious leaders who came to Jesus asked him to produce a "sign from heaven". They wanted Him to perform a miracle like it was some kind of magic He could conjure-up. He refused and said: "A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, but no sign shall be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonah" Matthew 16:4.

Second, actually this next "purpose" should have been first. I put it second because I felt the need to be up front about the numerous "performances" of miracles that we are experiencing today – it's showmanship, charlatans, an attempt to gain money and followers rather than reveal Jesus. Just ask yourself this, if these people (yeah, I actually said that) really do have this "gift of miracles" or "gift of healing" as they claim, then why are they not visiting hospitals? Why is it that the miracles always happen on live TV and at specified times? This is the murky waters on the swamp end of the purpose for miracles. Included in all that was the real, primary and perhaps only purpose for miracles from God's perspective: To reveal the Father. If a miracle does not do that; if that purpose is obscure, then you're in the murky waters of the swamp and need to spend some time "trying the spirits" to see if they're from

God. Unfortunately, many today are after the “experience” or desire to be in the presence of the “miraculous” rather than to know the true presence of God. Don’t forget that in the last days “God will send strong delusion so that they will believe a lie...” 2 Thessalonians 2:11. Isn’t it entirely possible, that the “lie” will be miracles? Look at Revelation 13 and the fact of the Beast performing signs and wonders. What’s the purpose of those miracles? That the people will believe in their supernatural power and submit to their leadership. It’s a lot easier for people to become willing subjects than to force them through coercion.

We must, therefore, deal with the motive of the person performing the miracle. If that motive in any way involves self-aggrandizement, then it is a motive devoid of the Spirit and relegated merely to the supernatural. No, they are not the same. The first belongs in the realm of the Holy Spirit while the latter belongs to anything beyond the natural ability of humanity. It includes “principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places” Ephesians 6:12. That is why we as Christians are instructed “try the spirits and determine which is from God” 1 John 4:1. Failure to follow that instruction leads to believing a lie. Oh, the miracles may well be real and the end result is still personal satisfaction – yours and the miracle workers. Then again, the miracles may well be false but the end result is the same; and, whether it’s true or false becomes obscured in the emotional rush of the moment and the thirst for more. Belief becomes the slave of sight or emotions rather than faith!

So, where are we? We are trying to discern between miracles.

1. Miracles cannot be explained by natural laws
2. Miracles should not be performed at will
3. Miracles should point people to glorifying God the Father
4. Miracles’ purpose is seen in the motive of the one performing the miracle

God has given more than enough insight and direction to help us keep to the crystal-clear purpose of miracles and not slide into the murky depths of personal, selfish or even demonic motives. In two separate instances recorded by Matthew (Mt 8:16 & 15:30), Jesus healed all who were brought to Him. Yet, in Matthew 13 we find Jesus in Nazareth unable or unwilling to perform miracles because of their (the people of Nazareth) unbelief. There is a dichotomy of miracles that is more than a little disconcerting and that is, miracles are not only dependent on supernatural power but also on the faith of the individual on the receiving end. Unfortunately, the second part has become the reason many modern “healers” use to excuse a lack of results.

I am almost completely deaf. It started out as a profound hearing loss that has progressed to the point of deafness. I cannot tell you the number of times I have been “prayed over” for healing. When that healing did not materialize, it was stated that it was because of my lack of “faith” that the miracle did not happen. Talk about a bummer – I’m not only deaf, but now it’s my fault that healing cannot happen!

It took me years of introspection and prayer to come to realize that just because a person’s faith is a critical component, it’s not the only component. Jesus never said have faith in the healer; nor did He say have faith in yourself. He said, “Have faith in God” Mark 11:22. The question then becomes: Is it always God’s will to heal? These healers emphatically say “yes” and that healing is in the atonement, “... and by his stripes we are healed” ~Isaiah 53:5. In other words, healing in all cases is as much ours as is the gift of Salvation. Those individuals who claim that often cite John 9:3, the man born blind that Jesus healed. Jesus said he was born that way in order for the works of God to be manifested in him. As

an aside, can't cases where there is no healing also manifest the works of God? But I digress, it's an isolated case, a one-off but it's used as a proof text by faith healers. It's a dangerous practice to use one verse to craft a theological position. However, if God enumerates it time and again, then it's safe to build a theological framework on that truth. When we search the Scriptures, the emphasis is placed far more on salvation than on healing. The trauma of those incidences of failed healing drove me to seek for answers. Yes, trauma. It's very traumatic and debilitating to wrestle with the belief that your continued illness is your own fault.

There was a young girl in our congregation whose stepfather had beaten her so severely that she suffered brain damage. Her adoptive parents took her to a healing service and the "healer" prayed for her and pronounced her whole. As she progressed into a young adult and eventually into assisted living, still crippled in body and cognitive ability, she believed with her whole heart that she had been healed. She, in her child-like faith testifies with halting speech that she is healed. I wept in frustration, anger and in awe at the simplicity of her faith. She, along with my own multiple experiences became the catalyst for my search for the purpose of miracles and the role of personal faith.

Imagine a person dying from Cancer or some other insidious disease being told that their "lack of faith" prevented their own healing – wouldn't they question everything they believe? Not the least of which is their own faith? What a horrible burden to put on someone! Yet it's done and with impunity and often as the excuse the healer resorts to for their own lack of results. Meaning, it's not the healer's fault that the recipient didn't have the requisite amount of faith. There is no fault in the healer or their "gift". No, the onus is always on the recipient! So, I searched the Scriptures and I found the answer. As a result, I came to a more complete understanding of faith. So much so that I crafted my own definition of faith, one based on the faith Jesus exemplified and NOT on the "faith" exhibited by so called "healers". The insight I received was not only comforting, but it was also exhilarating – I was free, free of the constraints placed on me by someone else's escape from personal responsibility. Free to be and accept my deafness as part of what I am.

I'll leave my personal journey in defining "faith" for another time and conclude with this thought. God does heal today and it's a miracle when He does. Creation too is a miracle, that is why the Scripture states: "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God..." Hebrews 11:3. Any other explanation – including the Big Bang Theory – is wholly inadequate.

John W. Peterson and Carlton C. Buck wrote the beloved hymn: I Believe in Miracles.

Creation shows the power of God
There's glory all around and
those who see must stand in awe,
For miracles abound.

I cannot doubt the work of God,
It's plain for all to see:
The miracles that he has wrought
Should lead to Calvary.

The love of God! O power divine!
'Tis wonderful to see
The miracle of grace performed
With-in the heart of me.

(Chorus)

I believe in miracles
I've seen a soul set free
Miraculous the change in one
redeemed through Calvary;
I've seen the lily push its way
up through the stubborn sod
I believe in miracles for
I believe in God!

I believe; and, in those times, when my belief i.e. faith falters, I like my namesake the Apostle Thomas cry out: "I believe, help my unbelief." I am a preacher and teacher. I preached for almost 30 years; now I teach math to hearing kids. I have a master's degree in education. When people find out I'm deaf they are amazed at all I've accomplished in my 70 years. To God be the Glory – He took a deaf person and made him a preacher and teacher.

Now THAT is a miracle!