

Miracles for Today

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Miracles in Scripture

As we know, the Bible includes numerous accounts of miraculous events in both the Old and New Testaments. Most of these miracles have to do with healing people's diseases, or deliverance from evil spirits. Just to list a few: At the word of the prophet Elisha, the Syrian commander Na'aman immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, and was healed of leprosy. Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, president of a synagogue, from death; on the way to Jairus's house he also healed a woman with a persistent hemorrhage. A paralyzed man was let down through the roof while Jesus was teaching; at Jesus's word he got up and walked away carrying his stretcher. When Jesus called his friend Lazarus out of the tomb, the dead man emerged very much alive. Going to the temple for prayer, the apostles Peter and John healed a man who had been unable to walk for years.

How do we respond today to these biblical accounts of miracles — instances of healing that go beyond what people normally expect in the absence of modern medical treatment? Or how do we respond when we hear of people being raised from the dead, including Jesus himself, raised from death after two nights in a tomb sealed with a large stone? As Christians we accept these scriptural accounts as authentic, eyewitness testimony to the power of Jesus to heal. But what if somebody claims that similar miracles occur today, in the twenty-first century? How do people deal with such claims?

Attitudes Toward Miracles

First, of course, many people simply deny that miracles occur, or could ever have occurred at all. For these people, the Bible's accounts of the sick being healed, or the dead raised, are just legends or fabrications. This view has dominated science since the 1700s, when the Scottish philosopher David Hume — observing no miracles in his local British environment — concluded that *nobody*, anywhere, could ever reasonably believe in supernatural events. In Hume's view nature is a closed system of cause and effect, and there can't be any supernatural input from outside the system. Today, many *think* this is a scientific view, though some are beginning to realize that it's poor science to disregard the evidence for miracles just because it doesn't support a conclusion you've already decided on. This was Hume's big mistake — he made his conclusion part of his argument in favor of his conclusion, which is a logical error. But Hume's error has been perpetuated through the educational system and media, and the general thinking that pervades our culture.

Then there are other people, devout Christians, who accept that Jesus and the apostles *did* perform miraculous acts, such as healing the sick and raising the dead. However, they believe these acts were signs to validate the preaching of the gospel of Christ; once the New Testament was complete these signs were no longer needed, so they stopped. These people are called "cessationists," because they believe miracles have ceased. To be fair, they believe God can still heal people through prayer, but they don't accept that certain individuals today could be specially gifted for healing ministry just as the apostles were. Therefore, they think today's "healing evangelists" are fraudulent, and the miracles they claim to perform in Jesus's name are faked.

A third group of people do believe that those suffering from illness or other conditions can experience a miracle today, through the ministry of an anointed evangelist or teacher who prays for them. But they've been taught that the key to healing is *having enough faith*. Sometimes these people receive healing, but more often than not they don't get healed. After a while they may come to question their own personal faith, and in extreme cases their disappointment might even lead them to abandon the Christian faith altogether. When receiving a miracle supposedly depends on *our* faith, it's easy to see why miracles are rare in an environment such as ours that discourages faith.

Western Culture Versus the "Majority World"

What explains the situation of the three groups I've described? Remember, we're talking about people in our own society, called "Western culture." People living in Europe and North America have been educated in an environment permeated by what passes for science. It's hard for such people to accept the reality of God's supernatural activity, because the supernatural isn't part of our typical worldview. We tend not to believe miracles, even if we see them taking place. Recently I viewed a debate in which a noted

atheist was asked what it would take to allow him to believe in God. “Show me a miracle!” he demanded. The problem is that if you’ve already decided miracles don’t exist, when you do see a miraculous event you just explain it some other way. As Jesus pointed out in his parable of Lazarus and the rich man, if people are determined not to believe what the Bible says, they won’t even believe if someone should rise from the dead (Luke 16:30-31).

Even Christians can feel funny about believing for healing today, because such belief takes them out of the kind of thinking typical of their friends, or of the influential voices that dominate our educational system or secular media. It takes a certain amount of courage to be a weirdo, doesn’t it?

In other parts of the world outside Western culture, however, the situation is entirely different. In what Craig Keener calls “the Majority World,” miracles of healing, raising the dead, and deliverance from demons often occur in response to prayer. Such events are accepted as a “normal,” if not always predictable, aspect of human experience. Keener has documented thousands of these events in a two-volume book published by a reputable academic publisher.¹ People who live in Africa, Latin America or Southeast Asia haven’t been influenced by David Hume’s denial that miracles could actually happen. They haven’t been brainwashed out of seeing the evidence for the supernatural. As a result, Christianity is expanding rapidly in those parts of the globe. People are experiencing the power of the living Christ for healing and deliverance, through the ministry of prayer. They’re abandoning their traditional religions, which they now see as false because they lack this power, and are turning to faith in Christ in large numbers.

Concluding Observations

So, to conclude, let’s make several observations. First, Keener’s research shows that miracles are more frequent in places where modern medical treatment isn’t available. In such places, God’s supernatural intervention is the *only* resource people can call upon. Miracles occur also where medical resources are available, and many doctors have witnessed them. In fact, the majority of doctors believe supernatural healing does take place. But modern medicine is another resource God has provided, and failing to use it when it’s available — along with prayer — may just be tempting God.

Second, whether or not you can see miracles depends on your worldview. Education is important, but if you’ve been *educated out of something* by a cultural prejudice, and not by solid evidence, that’s not good. When millions of people around the world offer testimony to healing, deliverance from evil spirits, or raising from the dead, it’s not proper science and certainly not good historical research to just dismiss this evidence because it doesn’t fit your preconceived ideas. No criminal trial would function if no one could ever believe the testimony of credible witnesses — yet that’s what happens when people simply refuse to believe the testimony of many to miracles that happen today, or the testimony to the miracles of Jesus and the apostles recorded in the New Testament.

Third, miracles don’t depend on how much faith we have. It’s true that Jesus often commended the faith of people he healed, but plenty of times in the New Testament the sick person’s faith had nothing to do with it. The power for healing is in the name of Jesus, not in my faith. It’s not whether I believe hard enough, but whether I act in obedience to Christ’s command to pray, that opens the possibility of receiving a miracle. In many events Keener recounts in his book, neither the person who prayed nor the person who was sick had faith, but the person was healed anyway because *Jesus* acted.

Fourth, while miracles occur today, they’re not predictable. God declares himself to be our Healer (Exodus 15:26), and on most occasions Jesus healed all who came to him (Luke 4:40). But, for unknown reasons, healing can be blocked. Some people do get healed through prayer today, but not everyone, every time. If miracles were predictable, they wouldn’t be miracles; they wouldn’t be God’s supernatural intervention in the normal processes of nature. If miracles occurred whenever we prayed for them, we would be using a magic formula — *abracadabra*, you’re healed! They wouldn’t be the personal response of an all-wise, all-loving Father. And we would rather know him as our Father, wouldn’t we, than as some robot miracle-dispenser up in the sky?

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).