

What are Miracles?

Many people define a miracle as anything God does.

But according to Ps 104 **He makes springs** flow (v.10), sends rain (v.13) **He makes grass grow** (v.14), causes the phases of the moon and the rising of the sun (v.19,20) and feeds all the animals (v.27).

Acts 17:28 **in him we live and move and have our being.** Under that definition, it's a miracle every time a person moves.

If you're going to make everything God does a miracle, then everything is a miracle, because Eph.1:11 says He **works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will**

Scripture never refers to things like that as miracles, and if those things were miracles, how would miracles ever prove anything?

People speak about "divine intervention," but the idea of divine intervention is meaningless when you realize God controls everything (how do you intervene in something you are doing?).

Others define miracles as anything God does that is especially wonderful.

Problem: That definition is arbitrary without Scriptural support.

It is also difficult to defend in practice. For example, on what basis would we say it is more wonderful for an axe head to float than for Jesus to take some children on His lap to bless them?

On what basis would we say it is more wonderful for chains to fall off the hands of Peter in prison than for a forgiven woman to anoint Jesus' feet and wash them with her tears and hair?

Others say a miracle is a display of great power.

But isn't gravity a greater display of power than walking on water? Doesn't it require more power to cause all the storms in the world than it does to stop one?

So what is a miracle? It's when God does something in a very different way than He normally does it.

Normally God gets me to church through an act of my will, and the operation of my car. The ways the environment responds to the actions within my car are so regular and so predictable, that we refer to them as "laws of physics."

The energy that comes from the explosion of gas inside the cylinders, and the mechanical transfer of that energy to the wheels, etc. is all the direct work of God, but we don't call it a miracle, because it's the way God ordinarily works.

But if God transports me instantly from my living room to the church building, that doesn't require any more power, it's not necessarily any more wonderful – but we call it a miracle, because it's so different from the way God normally works.

Miracles have been likened to a person running a little model city from remote control, who occasionally reaches in, grabs a street, and moves it to another spot.

What is the purpose of miracles?

It is worth noting three things:

1. God does not need miracles to get things done. He can accomplish anything through providence.

That's one way God is not like the operator of a model city. The guy operating a model city manually manipulates something, because he can't do it through remote control.

But if God wants a road moved, He can bring about certain events and move in the hearts of people and bring them to the point of freely deciding to move the road.

If God just wants people to be healthy, He could providentially prevent their illness, or heal them through natural means. He never needs a miracle.

If Jesus just wanted a safe, placid Sea of Galilee He could have providentially caused the storm to end or to not begin in the first place.

2. Miracles, by themselves, do not change the heart of unbelief that rejects adequate evidence.

Luke 16:31 **"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"**

3. Miracles are not necessary for those who already believe based on adequate evidence.

If I read that God created the world in 6 days, I don't say to God, "I will believe that if You make the sun stand still for 6 hours today."

If I read that Jonah was swallowed by a fish, or that Jesus is going to return someday, I don't say, "God, I'll believe that if you miraculously heal my uncle."

God has already authenticated Scripture by miracles.

I don't need to witness a miracle to be impressed with God's power, because I already know it is God's power that I witness every day all around me.

I don't need a miracle to convince me of God's compassion for the sick, because I see that compassion in the countless thousands of natural healings every day.

So miracles are not needed for God to accomplish something, they are not needed. And when there is already sufficient evidence for something, miracles are not needed for those who believe, and will not persuade those who don't believe.

So what does that leave?

Miracles serve the purpose of making it clear that something is from God that otherwise may be questionable. They are not for people with hardened unbelief. And they are not for people who already believe based on adequate evidence.

They are for people who are willing to believe, but do not yet have evidence.

Throughout the Exodus and conquest, God did numerous miracles in caring for Israel. He could have done that through providence, but used miracles to remove any doubt that Israel's God was supreme and showed special favor to Israel.

They didn't have the Bible, and so God essentially established His credibility at the time of the Exodus by means of miracles.

Just before the Exodus God tells Moses that He will **perform these miraculous signs of mine among them 2 that you may tell your children and grandchildren how...I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD.**" (Ex.10:1-2)

Then after they finally enter the Promised Land, referring to all the miracles of the Exodus and conquest: Josh.4:24 **He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of Yahweh is powerful and so that you might always fear Yahweh your God.**"

The rescue out of Egypt, the preservation in the desert, and the conquest of Canaan established God's credibility. After that, it was established, and no longer needed to be proved.

Notice when you read the Psalms, you don't see the Psalmist saying, "Oh Yahweh, You are so mighty – the miracles you did last week were astonishing."

Instead, even though most of the Psalms were written hundreds of years later, the references to miracles are all about the Exodus.

Ps 77:1-11

I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. 2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord...

The Psalmist is in trouble, so he cries out to God. But God doesn't seem to respond.

7 "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? 8 Has his unfailing love vanished forever?..."

10 Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High." 11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles...12 I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.

14 You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.

15 With your mighty arm you redeemed your people...

19 Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. 20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

And that's the end of the Psalm. Asaph doesn't say, "I need reassurance. Which was the most impressive miracle over the last several years?"

Instead he says, "How can I be sure the Lord hasn't abandoned me? The Exodus!"

Then the Psalm ends, because there is nothing left to be said. The miracles of the exodus removed any possibility of any doubt as to God's power and love and care for His people. End of discussion.

So God established and confirmed forever His own credibility with reference to His people with the Exodus.

But there is something else that remains that needs to be verified repeatedly by miracles: God's Word.

Miracles were necessary to prove a message or messenger was from God.

This had to be done repeatedly, because new messengers kept coming and claiming to be from God.

There is no way we can know if someone is speaking for God without a miracle to verify it.

Up until Moses, God seemed to speak directly to people. But then he called Moses to serve as a spokesman for Him.

Ex 3:10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." 4:1 Moses answered, "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The LORD did not appear to you'?"

God responded by doing two miracles.

8 Then the LORD said, "If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first miraculous sign, they may believe the second. 9 But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground."

30 He also performed the signs before the people, 31 and they believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

So God did the miracles of the Exodus to establish His credibility, and He did the miracles through Moses to let the people know that Moses was indeed His spokesman.

Next came the period of the Judges. This was a period of judgment on Israel. That generation who took that land did two bad things:

- 1) They disobeyed God's command to drive out all the pagans (2:1-4)
- 2) They failed to tell their children about the miracles of the Exodus (2:10)

The result was a wicked, unbelieving generation.

Jdg.2:10-23

10 After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.

14 In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them

15 Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. 17 Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them.

Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. 18 Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. 19 But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

So during that period, Israel would become captive to an enemy, they would finally cry out to God, in His compassion He would rescue them by means of a judge, and they would rebel again.

The judges were sometimes given miraculous ability, because God wanted it to be crystal clear that it was He who was showing mercy, and their victories were not due to their strength.

Then the miracles stop for hundreds of years. We read through all the rest of the historical books, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, and God does His work by means of providence with very few miracles.

But the OT Scriptures are not complete. God wants to give more than just the Law. He want to also give prophecy, so along come the prophets saying, "Thus says the LORD."

And since anyone can say that, and false prophets often do, God worked miracles through the prophets to prove they were from Him.

Then around 400 BC prophecy stops and the OT ends. And there are no prophets from God for 400 years, and so the miracles stop as well.

During those 400 years God loved His people, led His people, took care of His people, guided His people, provided for His people, etc. But He did it through providence, not miracles, because the OT Scriptures were complete.

No new revelation was being added, so there was no need for miracles to authenticate any new message. And the old message had already been authenticated.

So in the OT, we find 99.9% of the time there are no miracles. But if very select, rare, special cases, God did miracles. And those miracles had two purposes:

- 1) To establish God's greatness, power and credibility (only had to be done once)
- 2) To prove that a message or messenger was from Him (had to recur with every new messenger)

Then Christ comes along, claiming to be God in human flesh. And with Christ came the greatest display

of miracles ever.

The purpose of those miracles was to prove Jesus was from God.

John 3:1-2 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Acts 2:22 "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.

Christ gave that ability to the Apostles, and then commissioned them to write the NT.

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

Acts 14:3 So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.

2 Cor.12:12 The things that mark an apostle-signs, wonders and miracles-were done among you with great perseverance.

Again, the only way miracles can be useful for authentication of a messenger of God is if they are unusual events.

What you would think if I said, "I am a messenger from God, and I have another book for all of you to add to your Bibles. And as proof that I am indeed from God, I am going to cause a homing pigeon to fly back to its home."?

It is amazing when a pigeon can do that. It's not explainable by science. It's clearly an act of God. But it doesn't prove I'm from God, because it's something that routinely happens.

So I just showed you several passages that explicitly indicate that authentication of God's message or messenger is the purpose of miracles – exactly the same as we saw in the OT.

Those who argue for other purposes, such as Wayne Grudem, will take miracle accounts and observe what takes place in response to them, and turn that into a reason for miracles. For example, Grudem says one purpose of the miracles was to enable people to serve, and we know that because after Peter's mother-in-law was healed, she served food.

But by that logic we would have to say some other purposes of the miracles were to enable people to disobey or be ungrateful, because some people reacted that way after being healed (Mk.7:36, Lk.17:17).

God could have enabled Peter's mother-in-law to serve by healing her naturally.

While there are plenty of *results* of miracles, neither Grudem nor anyone else I read offered any passage of Scripture that indicates any other reason for miracles than authentication.

The only possible exception I can think of is miracles of judgment. Sometimes it seems that God brings supernatural judgments on people just to display His awesome power and to make it clear what is happening is from Him.

Conclusion

Are miracles normative? That is, should we be expecting miracles every day or every week? No. If so, they wouldn't be miracles.

Do they ever happen? Perhaps. I've never seen one. But that doesn't prove anything. Most of the

miracle reports I've heard I don't believe, but some sound pretty credible. My guess is God does do miracles from time to time for whatever reason.

Is it a bad thing that miracles are not more common? Are certain charismatic teachers correct when they say the reason there are not more miracles is because of a lack of faith? If so, Jesus must have lacked faith for 30 years.

Miracles are neither impossible nor necessary.

Some people want to put God in a box and say, "He can't do miracles today."

Some Charismatics want to put Him in a different box and say, "He has to do miracles on demand."

God can do miracles if He wants, but He doesn't have to do them.

Are the miraculous gifts (healing, prophecy, tongues, miracles, exorcism) still in operation?

We found last week that we know for sure one gift that has ceased – that of Apostle (Paul was the last one). The question is, did the signs that mark an Apostle also cease?

I don't know of any reason to assume the miraculous spiritual gifts had any different purpose than any other miracle. During the period of the writing of the NT, the Holy Spirit gave miraculous spiritual gifts that authenticated the NT message.

Once the NT was completed, just as with the OT, there was no longer a need for the miracles of confirmation.

And that's exactly what we observe – even in the NT itself. Toward the beginning, in the earlier books, there are many references to miracles, but in the later books, they become fewer and fewer.

In the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Co.12 we see numerous miraculous gifts. But by the time Paul writes Romans the list contains no miraculous gifts. Galatians may have been the first book written, and in Gal.3:5 it sounds like the miracles are still ongoing. But in later books like the Pastorals, which are all about how the local church is supposed to function, there is no mention of miracles.

And the later you go in the writing of the NT, you are hard pressed to find any reference to a miracle except in the past tense.

Heb.1:1-6 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, 2:1 We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. 2 For if the message spoken by angels (the OT) was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, 3 how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation (the NT)? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. 4 God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The message of the Gospel was announced by Jesus and confirmed by the miracles, and it was relayed by the Apostles who wrote the NT (also confirmed by miracles). And that is all referred to in the past tense.

That makes sense, since the Apostolic era was unique, and given the pattern in the past of miracles, and given the purpose of miracles, and given the definition of miracles, we wouldn't expect that miracles would be commonplace in the Church today.

What do we observe?

Not only do miracles appear to diminish during the writing of the NT, but immediately after the conclusion of the NT they really drop off.

When you read the writings of the church fathers who were around right after the close of the NT, it sounds nothing like the Gospels or even Acts. There are very few reports of miracles.

And God's people began to notice that right away. Origen: "Miracles began with the preaching of Jesus, were multiplied after His ascension, and then decreased. But even now some traces of them remain with a few..." (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.2 cited in 4 Views p.114)

And even in the few reports of miracles that did exist during that time, no one connected with those miracles claimed to be able to do them, like the Apostle could.

Normally we do not conform our theology to what we observe. Experience is not the test of truth. Are we committing that error here?

No, because the whole point of a miracle is for it to be observed. That's why God does miracles, is for people to observe them. So if they are not observed, that means something.

In my opinion, miracles are not observed on any large scale in the church today. The vast majority of miracle claims are the type that cannot be verified. Those that are subject to verification are almost always proven not to be miraculous.

I believe that if the miraculous gifts are in operation today, they are very rare. If I see a miracle or hear of adequate evidence for one, I'll believe it.