

I BELIEVE IN MIRACLES

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 3, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The Bible is filled with references to the miraculous. From the beginning of Genesis through the final portion of Revelation we read of miracles. These miracles are of several different kinds. For example, there are miracles of communication. God spoke directly to Abraham. On another occasion he spoke directly to Moses beside a burning bush in the wilderness of Midian. At the other extremity of the Bible the Lord spoke to John on the Isle of Patmos in a miraculous way. In addition to this the revelation of the Bible itself is a miracle, in that God in an unusual manner guided the men who wrote the various books that make up the Bible. These men wrote of events that they could not possibly have foreseen with their natural eyes. They wrote in a style so unusual as to suggest the miraculous. Their writings indicate a knowledge of future scientific discoveries that they could not have known on the natural level of observation. Still further evidence of the miraculous inspiration of the Bible is its remarkable unity. So, one large area of miracles is in the realm of communication.

Another area of miracles shows God's displeasure with sin. These are miracles of punishment. The flood, for instance, was a miracle of punishment. The great mass of water that overwhelmed the earth and destroyed all life except that which was saved in the ark and that which swam in the sea was a miracle. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were completely obliterated from the earth as another of miracles of punishment. In the New Testament we have an example of Ananias and Sapphira, whose lives were taken, as another miracle of punishment.

In addition to these are miracles of blessing. In the Old Testament we see a number of them. For example, when the Israelites were wandering in their flight from Egypt they were fed with manna and quail. When the water supply was inadequate fresh water was provided by a miracle of blessing. It is especially true in the New Testament, however, that miracles of blessing become apparent, healings performed by Christ were numerous and made a great impression upon the people of Jesus' day. Lameness were strengthened, blind eyes were given sight, deaf ears could hear again.

Finally, there is a general category, miracles which show God's greatness. Of course, all miracles show God's greatness, but some show it in a special way. The ten plagues, for instance, were designed in overwhelming the Egyptians to show God's magnificence and power. By comparison Pharaoh was powerless when God's power was miraculously demonstrated. There are other examples. In the New Testament the feeding of the five thousand people from a few loaves and fishes was an evidence of God's infinite power. No greater evidence is found, however, than Christ's resurrection from the dead. He was in the tomb, as dead as the Roman soldiers knew how to kill him, when God, in spite of their guard and in spite of their seal, caused him to live again. This was undeniable evidence of the greatness of God. All of these, from one end of the Bible to the other, are miracles.

What Is A Miracle?

In this modern twentieth century, the scientific age, there are people who say, "Miracles don't happen." They explain, "A miracle is simply a misunderstanding of events. The people probably were honest in thinking that a miracle happened, but they were mistaken. They simply thought a miracle happened." And many modern scientists say this. Others say, "Oh, I think it is just out and out deception. They falsely claim miracles knowing that they didn't really happen." There are still others who say, "No, it isn't either of these. It is simply that the people in the long ago were not able to understand or comprehend certain natural phenomena. Unusual, but natural events were thought to be miracles." So-called scientific, modern views sometimes explain miracles away as figments of the imagination, or worse.

We are inclined to believe that a more accurate definition of miracles is that given by C. S. Lewis, fellow of Magdalen College of Oxford University in England. I might add that C. S. Lewis, a full professor of this great five-hundred year-old university in England, is no novice, and certainly is not to be charged with being naive and uneducated. No university in the world stands higher than Oxford, and in Oxford C. S. Lewis has a rank that can not be questioned. His very excellent book, *Miracles*, first published in 1947, is the classic in its field, demonstrating adequately for any open mind that miracles are reasonable and believable. In this book he defines a miracle as "an interference with nature by supernatural power." The *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* gives this further definition: "Miracles are events in the external world, wrought by the immediate power of God and intended as a sign or attestation. They are possible because God sustains, controls and guides all things and is personal and omnipotent." These definitions of miracles fit the Biblical accounts. Super-nature, meaning supernatural power, from time to time for legitimate purpose or reason, comes down and reaches into the natural world, causing something to happen.

Are Miracles Reasonable?

For a moment, let us consider the reasonableness of miracles. Can we in the enlightened twentieth century still believe that miracles have happened? I believe we can. Let us begin by taking a look at the world in which we live. Let us back off and look at this planet

objectively. The most obvious fact of our universe is that it has system, order, plan and design. There is just no way to look at our world without seeing this element of plan or design. The seasons, the productivity of the soil, the ongoing of infinite varieties of life, and all of the other elements are just too perfectly worked out to have come by sheer chance. The whole system is an evidence of design and plan, which, in turn, is an irrefutable evidence of a designer, a planner, an architect, a builder.

A man walks along a road and sees a wrist watch. He stoops down and picks it up. It is obvious that in order for that watch to be lying in the road somebody had to make it. All the little wheels going around inside, the hands on the face, the numerals on the dial, the crystal, the case--all are evidence of a designer. All these things could not have just happened by the blowing of a wind. The moment you see a watch you know that there was a designer, a planner, a builder, or it could not exist. Similarly, the moment you look at our world there is irrefutable evidence that some great mastermind caused it to be.

Just this past week I was talking with some young people in a class about one little facet of the world in which we live. I mentioned the sub-zero temperature that we recently had. I was impressed when the temperature dipped to 15.2° below zero. That is unusually cold for middle Tennessee, but it is theoretically possible, so I am told, for the temperature to reach 273° below what we call zero. It never has, and it never will, because somebody is watching over this world to keep the temperature within the bounds required for life to go on.

How hot does it get in the summertime. Have you ever been through temperature of 123°? We read this figure on a thermometer one year in eastern California as we drove through. Recently I sat in a steam room of an athletic club where the gauge read 144°. But even that is just the beginning of how hot it could be. Through a little peephole window in the furnace at a refinery I have seen temperature of 15,000°. I am told that the exhaust of a jet airplane is around 4000°. Is it not strange that in all the centuries the earth has never veered toward the sun, the source of our heat, enough to raise the temperature to 200° or 400° or 500°? Is it not strange that the earth has never veered away from the sun enough for the temperature to go down to 100° below zero? If it had, our world would have become a burned out cinder, or else a ball of ice. No, the fact that our universe is so beautifully constructed is an evidence of God.

God Steps In

The point that I would make is simply that the whole universe is a miracle. It did not come by chance, it came by the creative power of God, the mastermind, the master architect. This being true, by what stretch of the imagination is it so unbelievable to say that God sometimes, when it suits his purpose, reaches into his system--our world--and touches it? That is a miracle. God simply supercedes one of his laws for a moment, as he did when Christ walked on the water. The law of gravity for a moment was nullified so that Jesus did not sink into the water. Who says that the designer of these laws cannot, when it suits his purpose, set a law aside for a moment, or for an hour, or for a year? Normally when a man dies his body decomposes, but who is to say that the God who set these laws in operation could not reverse the process, as was done when Lazarus came back to life. Who is to say that the normal process of producing food which takes weeks and months could not be shortened, as when a few loaves became enough food to feed a multitude? Who is to say?

Sometime I think of a vast model railroad system which I saw in a museum in Chicago. There it was, mountains and valleys, bridges and tunnels, tracks and trains, and all of it a system. Over in one corner there was a control center and a man who pulled the levers and pressed the buttons. A train up on the third track would begin to move. He would push a button and a switch would open and a train would go down a different track. The whole system was being worked from the control center. The whole system was being operated by rules that had been set in motion by the designer and builder of this elaborate model railroad. But who is to say that it is inconsistent or wrong when occasionally the one who works the system decides manually to reach over and remove a car from the track by hand? That is a miracle. It is done and it is reasonable and it is all right, if the man who built the system wants to do it.

Notice another illustration. The law of gravity is known to all of us. A stone lying on the ground is held motionless by the law of gravity. But I can decide to go over and pick up that stone. The law of gravity does its best, but the stone is picked up and thrown through the air. My mind and my muscle overcomes, sets aside, nullifies the law of gravity. Is it not reasonable to believe that the God who built our system and who placed the laws of nature in their proper places could sometimes, in order to show his presence and his concern for mankind, step into our universe and heal a sick man or raise a dead man? It is simply God's way of saying, "I am still concerned about you." If miracles did not happen, I would think it strange indeed. How odd that God would miraculously create a universe like ours and then never touch it again,

Do Miracles Happen Today?

Do miracles still happen? Not in the sense that men are agencies of miracles as were Paul and Peter and Moses. That day has ceased, if we understand correctly the Bible. The need for miracles to authenticate the message of God has passed. But in another sense miracles still happen, as God's children, the Christians, call on him through prayer. If prayer means anything it means that God reaches down and helps accomplish the end that some devout Christian has presented to him in prayer. It may be someone who is ill and God causes something to happen so that that person may be well. Or it may be some event that ought not to happen and the Christian's prayer causes God to keep it from happening. We could not believe in prayer if we did not believe in supernatural power. God's power comes into our world when it fits into his eternal purpose and changes things. That is what a miracle is.

As we close this study I hope that you believe in miracles. We believe in the miracles recorded in the Bible, but most of all we believe in the God who works miracles. I hope that the result of our study will be a greater appreciation, a greater admiration and a greater love for the God who made us and who cares for us still.