

IS IT REASONABLE TO BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 4, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

When we read the story of Christ's life, in Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, or John, immediately we find ourselves reading of many miracles. On one occasion Jesus stilled a tempest on the Sea of Galilee when the waves became so turbulent that they were in danger of sinking the vessel in which he and the disciples were sailing. At another time we read of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, who had become exhausted with hunger while following him. He multiplied five loaves and two fishes into enough food to feed the five thousand, with yet enough food left over to fill twelve baskets. On still another occasion we read of Jesus healing ten lepers, as they cried out to him for help. At still another time he restored sight to two blind men near Jericho. More impressive than any of these, perhaps, was the occasion on which he raised Lazarus from the dead. Together, these are only a few of the many miracles that Jesus worked during his lifetime.

In addition to these miracles connected with the life of our Lord, there are many other miracles mentioned in the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament there are miracles. The flood of Noah's day involved the miraculous. In the story of Abraham, we read of that which was miraculous. The freeing of Israel from Egyptian bondage involved numerous miracles. During the time of the kings and even more especially during the time of the prophets miracles were widely performed. On the other side of the life of Christ, the apostles of the New Testament also worked miracles. Even those upon whom the apostles laid their hands were endowed with the power of working miracles. The miraculous is prominent from one end of the Bible to the other.

What Is A Miracle?

At this point it is fitting that we pause to ask, "What is a miracle?" Webster defines a miracle as "An event or effect in the physical world deviating from the known laws of nature, or transcending our knowledge of these laws. A wonder, or wonderful thing; a marvel." This definition is so broad that it includes anything that is new or mysterious in the eyes of the people. Accordingly, when they were just being introduced to the public, radio and television were sometimes referred to as "miracles." Actually, this definition is inadequate by reason of the fact that it is so broad that it includes that which is simply unusual or beyond man's understanding. We now know that neither radio nor television is a miracle, for each is simply an advanced discovery of men, harnessing laws of nature that have been present since the beginning.

A better definition for our purpose is that supplied by C. S. Lewis, "An interference with nature by supernatural power." Still better is the definition found in the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, "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." A miracle, as understood in the Bible, is something above and beyond the ordinary laws of nature. It is any action on the part of God, which is direct and immediate and different from the workings of the usual laws of nature. It is supernatural.

Four Attitudes

Now, we are ready to ask a question, "Did such miracles as the Bible describes really happen?" Several different answers have been given to this question. There are some who would tell us that the alleged miracles were merely misunderstandings on the part of a primitive, superstitious people of the distant past. It is a bit difficult for me to think of Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Matthew the publican, Luke the physician, and the brilliant Saul of Tarsus as naive, superstitious primitives. A careful study of their lives, their work and their writings proves them to have been exceptionally competent and well-informed. Far from being outmoded, their writings still have a relevancy far superior to most writings of our own generation.

There are others who tell us that the miracle stories in the Bible were out-and-out deceptions. This is even harder to believe, because whatever else may be true about the men just named, nothing is quite so obviously true as the fact that they were good men. Their lives and their teachings combined to advocate the highest principles of ethical behavior. Our world today would be infinitely better if it had a few ethical and moral giants like Daniel and Paul. Whatever charge one might make against these great men of the past, it is utterly impossible to describe them as dishonest deceivers.

Still another view is that the miracle stories of the Bible are simply legends, which grow from almost nothing into towering miracle stories. This view holds that Christ must undoubtedly have been a powerful personality. When he came among the people he had, accordingly, quite an impact upon them. As they told the stories of his teachings and his activities to their children and grandchildren, the stories grew until they became legendary. Thus, what started out simply as an example of personal magnetism ended as a miracle. Just here I find myself thinking again of the men who described the miracles. In most instances they were eye-witnesses, writing of what they had actually seen happen. Matthew and John were certainly not telling stories that had grown through generations of telling and retelling, but rather were describing what their own eyes had seen and what their own ears had heard. Luke's descriptions of the

miracles performed by the apostle Paul were likewise eye-witness accounts. This, too, seems an inadequate explanation of the miracles of which one reads in the Bible

There is one other view. The stories of miracles that we read in the Bible are actual history. Jesus did perform miracles in which he controlled nature, as in the stilling of the tempest and in his walking upon the water of Galilee. Jesus did restore sight to blind eyes and hearing to deaf ears. Jesus did heal lame bodies and cure sickness of many kinds. Jesus did raise the dead. And so, with the other miracles of both Old and New Testaments. They actually happened; they were real history.

Are Miracles Reasonable?

The science-oriented man of the twentieth century prides himself in the fact that he accepts only that which is reasonable. Inevitably, we must face the question, "Are the miracles of which one reads in the Bible reasonable?" I believe that I can demonstrate that they are reasonable, though I realize that it is never possible to "prove" that a miracle has happened. Proof is something that occurs in the mind of man and depends upon the attitude of the person. Some minds are so solidly set against believing in the miraculous that no amount of evidence can "prove" that miracles happen. To the fair-minded, honest observer, I do, however, believe that I can demonstrate the reasonableness of miracles.

Let us begin with the fact that God created the universe. The opening sentence of the Bible reads, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen. 1:1). In passing, I might point out that the Bible never undertakes to prove the existence of God. It is always assumed as obvious. David said, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork." (Ps. 19:1). The universe about us, with its billions of stars, its galaxies, its planets, and the marvelous system and order that one observes, is evidence of a divine creative mind. The earth with its human and animal inhabitants is further evidence of a remarkable architect. The system of natural laws that function continuously and effectively in our world is also evidence of infinite planning behind the creation of our world. The microscopic world also shows evidence of not only exquisite beauty, but also exquisite planning. All of these cry out that there must be a God who brought this marvelous world into being. Man himself is a constant reminder of the infinite skill of the creator God.

Having said this, we now notice that not only did God create our remarkable world, but also that he continues to sustain or operate this world. He does this largely through an intricate system of natural laws, which we usually call the "laws of nature." The seasons, the productivity of the soil, the composition of the air, the tight control of temperature variations, gravity, and hundreds of others make up these laws of nature. The world has functioned smoothly for thousands of years and gives every evidence of continuing to do so until God shall determine it is time to end history.

God Steps In

Just here, we pause to suggest the manner in which miracles occur. Although the law of gravity demands that any object be pulled to the earth, or fall, man has the power by his own will to suspend or override the law of gravity when he wishes. Thus, man has the power to toss a rock into the air, though otherwise the rock would fall to the earth. Man's will makes it possible for a rock to rise, rather than fall as it normally would. Similarly, when God wishes to do so, he suspends or overrides a law of nature. Thus, Jesus could walk upon the water. A fig tree immediately withered away. A broken, lame body immediately became strong.

Another means of conveying what God does in the performing of miracles is in imagining an intricate, elaborate model railroad. I think of one I saw some years ago in the museum just off the lake in the city of Chicago. There were many tracks, several trains operating at the same time, mountains, tunnels, and all the rest that goes to make up an elaborate model railroad system. Everything was functioning properly and the man who was controlling the entire system stood in the corner of the giant display at the control center. He pressed a lever and a train moved. He touched another lever and a train went onto a side-track. Cars were uncoupled; other cars were attached; trains reversed their directions; and all the rest that goes to make up the activities of a fine model railroad. Occasionally, however, the operator would move into the system manually and lift a locomotive from its track by hand. While normally he operated the entire system from the control center, occasionally he intervened directly. This is what God does when he performs a miracle. He intervenes in our world, superseding the normal functioning of the laws of nature, for a purpose. It is not incredible or unreasonable to believe that the God who created our world, who installed its various laws, might occasionally, for a purpose, suspend some of its laws and operate directly in the affairs of men.

Close and Small

C. S. Lewis, late Professor of Magdalen College of Oxford University, in his fine book, *Miracles*, puts it most interestingly. He says that God in working miracles is simply doing "close and small" what he normally does on a grand universal scale. When Jesus multiplied five loaves and two fishes into enough food for a multitude of five thousand it was not something totally different from what he normally does, for all the time God is multiplying food. He does it in a thousand, thousand fields every year. He is doing it constantly in all of the seas and oceans of the world. A handful of grain is planted in a field and hundreds of bushels of grain are harvested a few months later. That is God's normal way of multiplying food. Similarly in the seas, fish are constantly multiplying and

thus providing food for mankind. The only difference is that in the long ago our Lord did “close and small” before the eyes of a multitude that which he normally does less obviously.

In the same vein, when Jesus healed men of their diseases he was doing “close and small” what he normally does on a world-wide scale. Our hospitals, with their skilled doctors and nurses, control our environment and assist us in “getting well” but all of us realize that actually healing is something that has to take place in man’s body itself. It can be seen most clearly in the case of a broken arm. The doctor can “set the arm,” but it is “nature” (God) that must do the actual healing. When Jesus worked healing miracles in the long ago, it was not something totally different from what he does all the time but rather it was more obvious, or as Lewis says, “close and small.”

Would it not be unreasonable to think that the God who created the universe, sustains the universe, and is concerned about his creation, had gone on a long journey never to come back? Is it not actually more reasonable to think of the God who set all of existence in motion, as standing close by and intervening from time to time when there is some special reason for doing so? Sir Isaac Newton believed in miracles, just as we described them, as the “unusual” or “occasional” action of God, in contrast to the “usual” or “customary” action of God which we observe in the functioning of the laws of our world.

Characteristics of Bible Miracles

It is interesting to notice that the miracles of which one reads in the Bible have certain significant characteristics. First, they exhibit the character of God and teach truths about God. They are constructive, healing miracles, and are never capricious, or immoral, or unethical. Secondly, they are in harmony with the established truths of religion. They never contribute to dishonest purposes, nor fight against the good. They are consistent with the ethical principles of which we read in the scriptures. In the third place, there is an adequate occasion for them (religious purpose). They are always designed to do something. They serve as “signs” as suggested in the gospel of John. Finally, they are established not by the number of witnesses, but by the character and qualifications of the witnesses. Those in the scriptures who write of the miracles and who believe in the miracles are the finest people that our earth has known. They are competent to observe, careful in their recording, and highly ethical in their lives. They were good witnesses.

The Central Miracle

When one doubts the miracles of the Bible he is destroying the very heart and center of Christianity. The central miracle of all was the coming of the divine Son of God to live in human form among men. All other miracles fade into insignificance when compared with this great miracle. To deny the miraculous is to deny the divinity of Christ. To deny the supernatural is to erase the existence of God and the angelic host of which we read in the scriptures. It is to destroy the concept of heaven and of hell. It makes prayer meaningless. In short, it leaves a religion devoid of its strength and power. C. S. Lewis put it, “All the essential of Hinduism, would, I think, remain unimpaired if you subtracted the miraculous, and the same is almost true of Mohammedanism. But you cannot do that with Christianity. It is precisely the story of a great miracle. A naturalistic Christianity leaves out all that is specifically Christian.”

Let us close this study with the words of the apostle John, “Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31). There we have the purpose behind the miracles of the scriptures. They were written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing we might have life in his name. Surely this is reason enough for miracles.