

# **“Big Question 8: Do miracles really happen?”**

**Sunday 1 March 2009**

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## **Readings:**

Exodus 6:28-7:13

Psalm 145:1-7

Matthew 11:1-5

## **Sermon**

The subject of miracles has always been a bit of a controversial one.

Miracles have been claimed for various kinds of dubious reasons. People have attributed amazing happenings to some particular place, or some special object ... as though the place or the object itself had miraculous powers. Ideas about miracles have got tangled up with all sorts of superstitions and false spirituality ... and sometimes this has been a cause of major disagreements within the Church. Miracles are a problem!

The New Testament has quite a lot to say about Spiritual Gifts of things like wisdom and healing, prophecy and teaching, evangelism ... and miracles. St Paul writes that they are God given gifts to build up the Church, and they are to be used for the good of all.

The early Church saw sick people healed, lame people walk, and blind people see ... even the dead were raised back to life in some cases. Philip found himself transported from one place to another to encounter people who were hungry to learn about Jesus. People saw visions ... Peter was released from prison by an angel ... Paul was saved from shipwreck.

But what about now?

Some Christians sincerely believe that all spiritual gifts, including the gift of miracles, were given only to special people for special times ... such as to Moses at the time of the Exodus, to the prophets at the time of God's judgement on Israel, and especially to Jesus during the three years of his ministry ... and that they came to an end after the time of the apostles.

Other Christians believe equally sincerely that miracles are a normal part of the life of God's people, and should be just as much a part of the Church today as they ever were.

Belief in miracles can be an excuse for those who are not Christians – or perhaps even anti-Christian - to pour scorn on the faith of believers who they see as naive and foolish. It is bound to happen, really. The subject of miracles takes us out of the realm of the normal and explicable, and into the realm of things which cannot be explained ... from matters mundane to matters of faith. And people often make fun of that which they cannot explain.

Fans of Harry Potter will recall that among the wizard fraternity, those who are not wizards are known as 'Muggles'. Some of the students rather pity the Muggles. They treat them with disdain, as those who live mundane lives, with no understanding of

the mysteries of Hogwarts and the secret arts learned there. They mock because they feel superior.

Well, with Christians and miracles it seems almost to be the other way around. Sometimes those who believe in such things are written off as 'other-worldly' and out of touch with reality ... putting their faith in something which those who think they are more enlightened think of as foolish. If you believe that God can do the impossible, maybe some people will think you crazy.

So ... our Big Question today is "Do miracles really happen?" ... and because we have a lot happening here this morning, and I don't want to go on too long, I'm going to look at this by asking six more questions!

## **1 What is a miracle?**

Sometimes people use the word 'miracle' rather too freely. You know the sort of thing:

- "It's a miracle I got my essay finished on time."
- "It's a miracle he didn't get knocked down by that car."
- "It's a miracle she hasn't taken someone's eye out with that umbrella"

But a miracle is much more than a happy outcome to a tricky situation. A miracle has to involve a sense of overcoming the seemingly impossible, not just the unlikely.

Peter Wagner, an American Theological Professor defines a miracle as:

"a powerful act of God that is perceived by observers to have altered the ordinary course of nature."

So a miracle might be a sovereign act of God which transcends the usual laws of nature ... or even an otherwise natural event occurring in a way that is astonishing. For instance, coincidences can obviously happen, but when 'coincidences' keep happening in such a way that they fulfil God's purpose, we have to be open to the possibility that something more is going on.

Example:

There was a time when the Israelites were wandering in the desert and in urgent need of water. God told Moses to go and strike a rock with his staff. Moses did so, and water came pouring out of the rock.

Now, it could be that there was a spring there, running under the surface, which no-one had seen until Moses struck the rock ...

... or it could be that there was no water there until God provided it.

EITHER WAY, the water was only found when God told Moses to strike the rock.

Did God alter nature to meet their need, or simply use nature to meet their need? It doesn't matter. The miracle was performed, and their need was met.

I mentioned Harry Potter earlier to illustrate a point. What a miracle IS NOT is magic.

God as creator is able to bend the forces of nature to his will and purpose. What the dark arts do is to distort the natural order by corruption and deceit, in order to promote evil and bring harm ... and the Bible is absolutely clear that we must keep away from such things.

Whether Harry Potter books and films, as fantasy, fall into that category is a question which Christians will probably debate for a long time. We'll not get into that this morning!

## **2 Did Moses perform miracles in Egypt?**

Those of you who have been following the story through will recall that Moses had gone to Pharaoh with a message. God wanted Pharaoh to let his people go. From then on in, things just got worse for the Israelite slaves.

Pharaoh instructed the slave drivers to stop providing straw, so that the people had to gather their own straw to make bricks. None the less, they had to make just as many bricks as before ... and the people were, not unnaturally, displeased – angry, in fact.

Moses took the people's complaints to God, and God reassured Moses that he would see some action! God told Moses to tell the people:

*"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God."* (Exodus 6:6f)

In today's Exodus reading we saw the beginnings of the outworking of that promise. For all Moses' uncertainties and lack of confidence, God went with him into Pharaoh's presence ... and although Pharaoh continued to defy God's command, Moses stayed his ground.

The incident of the staff turning into a snake was just the beginning, of course.

If we had time to work through the following four chapters, we would see a sort of contest between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians and sorcerers - a contest involving blood, frogs, flies, livestock, boils, hail and locusts ... miracles against magic ... with the inevitable conclusion that God gained the upper hand.

Try as people might to explain away the miracles performed through Moses as natural phenomena, some were clearly not ... the staff turning into a snake, for example. Even those things which *could* have occurred naturally - like the plagues of locusts, flies, or frogs - occurred just at the right time in order to fulfil God's plan and purpose ... and that in itself was a miracle.

## **3 Was Jesus a miracle worker?**

Our gospel passage in Matthew 11 has Jesus sending a message to John the Baptist, who was in prison, and desperate to know the truth about Jesus. John wanted to know whether Jesus was who John thought he was. Was he really the Messiah ... God's anointed?

Jesus said:

*"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."* (Matthew 11:4f)

The three years which Jesus spent in active ministry in Galilee and Judea were characterised by preaching the kingdom of God, teaching his disciples the ways of God, and meeting the needs of the people. Miracles were therefore a means to an end.

Performing miracles was certainly not Jesus' main purpose ... but in his compassion for the sick he often healed them ... in times of need he provided for them, such as at the feeding of the five thousand ... in times of danger he even overpowered the forces of nature, such as the storm on the Sea of Galilee ... and on a few occasions, faced with the heartbreak of the bereaved, he even raised the dead.

#### **4 Why did Jesus perform miracles?**

We have to face the fact that although Jesus healed the sick, there were many he did not heal. Although he provided for the needy, there were still many poor people in Israel. Although he saved his disciples from drowning, thousands suffered and died at the hands of the Roman occupying army. Although he even raised the dead ... it was only a very few.

Jesus did not perform miracles to make himself look good ... and he didn't do it to be in permanent conflict with the works of darkness. His miracles were signposts to the coming kingdom, when every wrong will be righted ... every injustice overcome ... every wound healed and every tear dried. They pointed forward to the victory over evil that was won on the cross, and the coming of his kingdom when he returns in glory at the end of the age.

For John the Baptist, the Miracles which Jesus did were the proof he needed that the Messiah had come, that God's Kingdom was coming ... all with the aim of turning people from sin to repentance and from death to life.

#### **5 Do miracles really happen today?**

There is no question that we are not seeing miracles in the way that the Israelites did in Egypt, or as the disciples witnessed at the time of Jesus. There may be many reasons for that, but ultimately it is a matter of God's will.

But there is plenty of documented evidence of miracles in our own time ... of healings ... dramatic rescues by angels ... people receiving practical help by miraculous means ... Christians protected from harm. Think of Graham Payne in his recent motoring accident, when police and medical staff alike were astonished that he escaped unharmed from the wreckage of his car.

Many of us have experienced God providing for us in unexpected ways, when only he knew our need. We can look back as a family to when money was posted through our door when the bank account was empty, or food was provided just when we needed it.

Mission Societies in Africa have reported astonishing healings ... Jackie Pullinger, working with drug addicts in Hong Kong tells of heroin addicts coming off drugs, without symptoms, by the power of prayer. I wonder what we shall hear from Steve Burnett when he comes back from helping the communities on the rubbish dumps in the Philippines.

It does seem that miracles have most often occurred in 'clusters' at key points in history ... like the time of the Exodus, or around the life of Jesus ... when God was doing a new thing and needed to make a point! ... or in the places around the world where there is spectacular growth in the Church at this time.

#### **6 Should we expect to witness miracles?**

It is possible that we see few miracles because we don't expect much of God. Maybe if we believed in a God of miracles, and trusted more, we would experience more.

Having said that, true faith is not 'God on demand'. God is not a slot machine who performs for our amusement, or even to suit our convenience. His purpose is bigger and wider than that.

God's purpose concerns the whole shape of history and the fulfilment of the whole creation. In each situation God may choose to heal, or not to heal ... to give, or to withhold ... to say 'Yes', or to say 'No'. It is not that he loves us more or less, because he could not love us more. We have to trust to his wisdom ... and often to wait for understanding.

But maybe we have too narrow a view of what a miracle looks like:

- Is it a miracle to be healed of a terminal disease ... or is it a miracle to face death at peace with yourself and at peace with God?
- Is it a miracle to have everything you want, just as you want it ... or is it a miracle to find contentment with little and live a life of thanksgiving?
- Is it a miracle to love God when all is going well for us ... or is it a miracle to trust him when it seems as though everything in life is going wrong?

Actually, the very thing we are doing here this morning points to the biggest miracle of all. Baptism is a sign of new birth ... a fresh beginning as a forgiven child of God.

When someone hears the Good News, and becomes a Christian, and receives Jesus as their Lord and Saviour ... the Bible says that he or she is 'a new creation'.

Every believing Christian is the result of a miracle. The old has gone ... the new has come. It is an cause for real rejoicing.

So, we should say, with the Psalmist (Psalm 145:3-5):

*"Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no-one can fathom. One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works."*