

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL MIRACLE?

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Focus

Let us state in no uncertain terms at the outset of this unit that we firmly believe in miracles in Bible times and today. We also affirm that God used miracles at special times for extraordinary purposes. With that said, you may say, “What is there left to talk about?” We live in a society that by and large does not understand the idea of miracles. Because of this, it is important that we have a clear view of what the Bible means when it describes miracles so that we can explain this term in ways that can be comprehended by today’s young adult. Our goal is to understand and affirm Scripture so that we can communicate its truth clearly and boldly in today’s world.

Second, when we talk about miracles in this unit, we will have in mind the kind of dramatic miracles represented in the Bible by events like the crossing of the Red Sea or the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Today, some Christians use phrases like, “Expect a Miracle!” or “Did You Have Your Miracle Today?” indicating their faith in God working in their lives in many ways every day. Other Christians might not use the word miracle to describe these same workings in their lives, but they still recognize and are thankful for the many life-shaping ways God intercedes in their lives. In these lessons, we will not try to differentiate between what some describe as “daily personal miracles” and what others describe as “the constant minute-by-minute working of God in the lives of His people.” Either of these descriptions is a good way to talk about how God graciously helps us. However, when you see the word miracle used in this unit, think about the phrase “signs and wonders,” indicating God’s special intervention in history in absolutely clear and demonstrative ways. That will be the definition of miracle we are working to understand here.



BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Deuteronomy 6:20-23; 13:1-5; 28:45-46; Acts 2:22-23; 5:12-16; 2 Corinthians 12:11-12



COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

The Question of Miracles

How do we recognize miracle stories in the Bible? What are their characteristics? How are miracle stories different from other stories? Is there any pattern or format in miracle stories that the original readers or hearers could easily put their fingers on and say to themselves, “We are hearing a miracle story”? In short, what is a biblical miracle?

We must set aside for now our modern philosophical and theological definitions, presuppositions, and views of miracles, and attempt to understand what the word miracle meant to the writers and first readers or hearers of our

biblical texts. For example, Webster defines miracle as “an extraordinary event manifesting a supernatural work of God.” In this definition we find an implied assumption that there is a difference between natural and supernatural. The only problem is that a biblical writer did not make such a neat distinction between nature and a supernatural work of God. After all, nature itself is God’s own creation and therefore the domain of His activity (Genesis 1; Job 38—39). In a sense, everything that happens is, by definition, a miracle—a work of God. Whether or not it can be explained by the laws of nature is not the critical issue, as

far as the biblical perspective is concerned. Yet our biblical materials do present certain events in history or phenomena in nature that are explicitly called miracles, signs, or wonders.

One way we might approach this lesson is to note passages in the Bible where the word miracle or its synonyms occur. But even if we did track down every occurrence of the word miracle and its synonyms, we would still be faced with at least a couple of problems. First, writers, whether ancient or modern, do not always explicitly label their writings. In other words, there may be events in the Bible that are understood as miraculous in the biblical sense even if they are not explicitly labeled as such. For example, even though the Virgin Birth and the resurrection of Christ are clearly miraculous, they are never explicitly labeled as miracles in the Bible. Since miraculous events in the Bible are not always labeled as such, we must somehow find another way to identify and define a biblical miracle.

Second, the purpose of telling stories in ancient Israel or in the Early Church was to nurture and cultivate the faith of God's people, to encourage them to persevere in difficult times, or to instruct them in their understanding of God or Christ. Since circumstances and conditions change over a period of time, it may very well be that attitudes and viewpoints about miracles may vary from one biblical book to another, or even from one part to another within a single book, to say nothing of differences between Old Testament and New Testament perspectives.

Perhaps a good place to begin would be to note some words in the Bible that come close to what we understand a miracle to be. Although a comprehensive survey of biblical vocabulary with reference to miracles would be extremely valuable, such an undertaking would be beyond the scope of this lesson. Therefore we will limit our discussion to one particular phrase in the Bible, "signs and wonders." (Depending on the version of the Bible you use, this phrase may sometimes be translated "signs and miracles.")

In the Gospel of John, for example, we often find two conflicting evaluations of miracles, one positive and the other not so positive. In John 2:11, we find a positive evaluation of the miracle at the wedding in Cana where Jesus turns water into wine. Through this miracle Jesus *revealed his glory; and his disciples put their faith in him*. But in John 2:23-24 we find a little different attitude toward miracles. Here the Gospel writer raises some doubts about the faith of people who believe in Jesus simply on the basis of His miracles. Note also the negative tone in John 4:48. Some sort of explanation is necessary as to why in one and the same Gospel two different evaluations of miracles seem to be present. (This point will be discussed more fully in a later lesson.)

Biblical Background

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the phrase made up of the two Hebrew words translated "signs and wonders" occurs 18 times. (Half of these are in Deuteronomy alone.) In the majority of these 18 occurrences, the two words are in the plural and the reference is to God's miraculous rescue of the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. The two words "signs" and "wonders" also occur many times by themselves and in a majority of cases refer to the Exodus from Egypt or God's other marvelous works.

However, signs and wonders may also have a negative connotation as a means of deception or pronouncement of curse. In Deuteronomy 13:1-5, Israel is admonished to serve the Lord and not go after other gods. Israel must remain true to Yahweh even if a prophet should arise and persuade people to go after other gods by performing "a sign" or "a wonder" as validation of his message. Even if the sign or wonder genuinely takes place, it must not be accepted as validation of his message. Such a prophet must rather be put to death. Genuineness of a prophet's teaching is validated not by a sign or a wonder but by its conformity to the commandments of God. Spectacular acts that evoke a sense of amazement are no proof of the authenticity of a prophet or his teaching. Scripture must be the test of truth.

According to Deuteronomy 28:46, a sign and a wonder may in fact represent the judgment and curse of God for Israel's disobedience. Similarly, the miraculous signs and wonders in the Exodus event, though they were symbols of divine blessing and redemption for Israel, represented judgment, doom, and death for Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

New Testament

In the New Testament, the Greek equivalent of "signs and wonders" occurs 16 times, all in the plural. Nine of these are in Acts and refer to marvelous deeds accomplished by God through designated persons. In two of his letters Paul mentions signs and wonders which Christ did through him. In a few cases, a third word translated "mighty works" (or sometimes "miracles") is added.

As in the Old Testament, signs and wonders may have a negative connotation as a means of deception performed by false messiahs and even by demonic powers (Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:9). In John 4:48, Jesus displays a feeling of exasperation at people who seem to need signs and wonders as a basis for faith.

What Is a Biblical Miracle?

Several observations may be made from the brief survey above.

1. Signs and wonders represent divine activity at significant junctures in the history of salvation. Signs and wonders do not seem to be common occurrences to be expected on a daily basis. They represent acts of God in behalf of His people at significant points in history.

In the Old Testament, the Exodus from Egypt certainly stands out as a pivotal event in the history of Israel, celebrated on a regular basis in story, song, and worship. It is in connection with the Exodus event that the phrase “signs and wonders” occurs most frequently in the Old Testament. It is worth noting that not even the miraculous deeds of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4—5) are called signs and wonders.

In the New Testament, the phrase “signs and wonders” occurs most frequently in Acts and refers to miraculous deeds which God accomplished through Jesus, the apostles, and other designated individuals, such as Stephen, Paul, and Barnabas. As in the Old Testament, the reference is to critical junctures in the history of salvation, such as God’s confirmation of Jesus as Christ and Lord, the giving of the Spirit, the inauguration of the Church in apostolic times, and the launching of new strategies in communication of the gospel.

The two references that Paul makes to signs and wonders in his own ministry are specifically in connection with his apostleship to Gentiles. In both cases he seems extremely reluctant to speak of them. According to Romans 15:15-19, Paul dare not speak of anything except what Christ has done through him *by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and miracles (wonders) through the power of the Holy Spirit*. Likewise in 2 Corinthians 12:12 he says, *The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles (mighty works)—were done among you with great perseverance*. But the context in 2 Corinthians makes it very clear that it is the stubbornness of the Corinthians that has forced him to mention these mighty works in defense of his apostleship. In fact, he feels like a fool when he talks about such things (v. 11).

It seems reasonable to conclude then that signs and wonders in biblical perspective refer to God’s own providential activity at critical points in the history of salvation. One must be careful not to generalize too quickly about miracles to the point of making them routine events. If signs and wonders mean anything, they seem to at least imply unexpected, unusual, surprising turns of events.

2. There is the awareness in various biblical writings that signs and wonders may be done by human beings or even demonic powers. A warning is issued in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 to caution the people of God that signs and wonders may be performed by a false prophet. In the discourses of Jesus in the Gospels there is the warning that *false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles (wonders) to deceive the elect—if that were possible* (Mark 13:22; cf. Matthew 24:24). And according to 2 Thessalonians 2:9, *the coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders*. Therefore, signs and wonders are not to be viewed in and of themselves as proof of divine activity.

The popular notion that the miracles of Jesus prove His divine nature needs to be carefully examined. Could it be that the purpose of His miracles lies elsewhere? What

Sometimes people wonder why we do not see as many miracles now as in biblical times, the implication being that Christians today do not have the faith that people in the Bible had. Two questions need to be raised at this point. First, were miracles in the Bible in fact everyday occurrences, as some people seem to think? If they were routine happenings, would they have evoked such surprise and astonishment as we find described in response to the miracles which Jesus or the apostles performed (Matthew 8:27; 9:8, 33; Acts 3:9-13)? Second, even if we were to assume that miracles in the Bible were more common than they are now, is it necessary to conclude that people in the Bible had more faith than Christians today? While this could be a legitimate conclusion, the issue may not be how much faith people have or do not have. Could it be that God chooses to act decisively and miraculously in some cases and in certain periods in history and not in others? What is the relationship between faith and miracles? This is an important question that we will continue to look at throughout this unit.

about people today who claim to be from God because they seem to have the power to perform astounding miracles? If false Christs and even demonic powers can produce miracles, how do we measure the genuineness of any miracle worker?

3. Signs and wonders must be carefully evaluated.

Do they point to God? What about the character of the person doing the miracles? Does his or her life manifest godliness, humility, and Christlikeness? Do the miracles confirm and strengthen the community of faith, or do they confuse, contradict, and destroy it?

Making use of the three biblical terms, **signs**, **wonders**, and **mighty works**, we may apply the following three tests in order to evaluate the genuineness and divine origin of miracles.

Mighty Works. Is the miracle perceived as a mighty act of God, with God as its source, or is the attention focused more on the miracle itself or the human agent?

It should be noted that the genre of miracle in the Bible is not defined simply by making a distinction between natural and supernatural. In fact, some of the miracles that are attributed to divine activity are at the same time described in natural terms. Note, for example, how the psalmist in Psalm 78:43-48 can on one hand speak of God’s “signs and wonders” in Egypt and yet on the other hand describe these as natural phenomena: blood, flies, frogs, caterpillars, locusts, hail, frost, thunderbolts. Likewise, in the Book of Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea is described in terms that defy a simple distinction between natural and supernatural: *and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind* (Exodus

14:21; cf. 15:10). The sea, which in biblical tradition is often a symbol of chaotic power hostile to God's rule, is no match to God's creative power and redemptive purpose for His people (Psalms 77:16-20; 114:1-8). It is not a matter of recognizing a supernatural act and distinguishing it from natural phenomena. Nature itself is God's creation and can become the instrument and arena of His continuing work. The decisive point in divine miracles is that God himself is recognized and confessed as omnipotent, sovereign Lord. He himself is at the center of the miracle.

Signs. Is the miracle a sign or a witness to God's character known to us from our biblical and theological tradition? Or is it in total contradiction of everything we know about God from other sources?

A miracle in itself is not a sufficient indication that God is acting. If a miracle is to be a sign that God is truly present and acting providentially, it must be corroborated and supported by four criteria. First, is the miracle consistent with the biblical witness about God? Or does the miracle present a picture of God which contradicts Scripture? Second, is the miracle consistent with Christian tradition and the collective witness of the Church through the centuries? Or is the miracle a departure from the theology and practice of the Church in its long history? Third, is the

miracle consistent with biblical ethics? Or does it contradict the ethical sensibilities of Christian values? And fourth, does the miracle confirm our personal experience of God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ? Or does the miracle mean a contradiction of what we have come to know of God in personal experience?

Wonders. Is the miracle an indication that God is acting unexpectedly, surprisingly, and sovereignly, so much so that it gives rise to a sense of wonder, awe, and praise among the people of God? Or is it human manipulation to bring about desired ends through magical means?

In a sense, this third test stands in tension with the second test. A sign takes seriously what has gone before, the past, and the continuity of Christian tradition. "Wonder," on the other hand, implies something new, something surprising, something unexpected. We must leave the door open for God to act in new ways, perhaps even in ways that we have never conceived before. We do not have everything figured out about God. He is a God of the impossible. However, the wonder in miracles must still point us to this God of wonders rather than to a wonder-working human agent. In other words, does the miracle increase our sense of gratitude and praise to God, or does it call attention to the greatness of the miracle worker?

N-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today's subject.

1. Definition of Miracle

Give students a 3" x 5" card or a sheet of paper and have them define "miracle." They may write single words, phrases, or ideas which would define and explain what they understand a miracle to be. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share with the class their definitions. You may want to write their responses on the board in the form of short phrases or single words. Students may suggest such ideas as supernatural, mysterious, unexplainable, unusual, no scientific explanation, work of God, and so on.

You may continue the discussion by asking, **Do you think people in Bible times would have defined miracles the same way we do? How would these definitions be similar? How would they be different? How do you account for these differences and similarities?** You do not need to spend too long a time on this because it will be discussed more fully later in this unit.

Make a transition to the main focus of this lesson, namely the biblical genre or category of miracles. What is the understanding of miracles in the Bible? Use ideas from the section in the Commentary titled "The Question of Miracles" to point out the complexity of the topic at hand.

2. Why Fewer Miracles Now?

Ask the class this question: **Do we see as many miracles now as in Bible times? Why, or why not?** Students may or may not want to agree with the assumption in the question that miracles are more rare now than in Bible times. Summarize responses on the board. After a few minutes of discussion, make a transition to the main topic of this lesson. Ask, **What views and attitudes toward miracles do we find in the Bible?** Again, point out some of the complexities of the question by using ideas from the first section of the Commentary, "The Question of Miracles."

3. A Personal Experience

Ask the class if they have ever experienced what they would call a miracle, either personally or through the life of someone close, such as a family member, a friend, a business associate, or someone in the church. If it is appropriate, you may want to ask the person or the class to discuss why the experience described fits into the category of miracle. Were there others who doubted whether this was a miracle? Why is it that some cannot see a miracle where others can? If someone is healed from an illness after much prayer but also after much medication, should such healing be considered miraculous? In what ways?



PRESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today's topic.

1. Lecture/Discussion

Present the main ideas of the two sections titled Biblical Background and What Is a Biblical Miracle? from the Commentary in 20-25 minutes. Encourage discussion as you move from one point to another by using some of the questions in the Commentary. Or you may want to give a straight lecture for 10-15 minutes and allow some time for discussion at the end of the lecture.

The lecture and discussion should allow the class to reflect on and respond to the following three propositions made in the Commentary:

1. Biblical miracles represent divine activity at special times. They were not as common as we sometimes think they were.
2. Even a false prophet or a questionable character may actually perform a real miracle.
3. Miracles must be carefully evaluated. Therefore, to raise questions about miracles is not necessarily wrong or an indication of faithlessness.

2. Small Group Study

Divide the class into small groups. Each group may have one to four students, depending on the size of the class. Assign to each group one set of the biblical references listed on *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A*. (If the class is very small, you may eliminate set No. 2 or No. 5.) All of these are passages that use the phrase "signs and wonders" or its equivalent and which have been discussed or referred to in the Commentary.

Allow each group to read and reflect on their passages. After a few minutes they must formulate a statement

of one or two sentences that reflects the basic idea of the biblical passages under consideration and answers the question, **What are signs and wonders?** Ask a spokesman from each group to read to the class the statement which they have formulated. Guide the discussion along the lines suggested in the Commentary.

3. One-Word Commentaries

Using the scripture references listed on *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A*, read or have read each of the passages separately. (Depending on time, you can choose to read most or only some of the passages listed.) As each scripture is read to the class, have each student write down a one-word commentary on that passage that describes for him or her the impact of the phrase "signs and wonders" or its equivalent. After the passages have been read, compile a class profile of descriptive words your students selected to portray the **message** and **emotion** of these "signs and wonders" passages.

4. Miracle Evaluation

After providing a background for your class concerning some of the issues in defining biblical miracles, concentrate your discussion on how we can go about evaluating miracles, both ancient and modern. Before class, assign to three of your students one of the three sections in the Commentary that talk about miracle evaluation—**Mighty Works, Signs, Wonders**. Provide for each of these students a copy of the Commentary and instruct them to present a short summary of their material to the class. Ask your class to look for the ways these three criteria interrelate and to discuss how helpful each category is in evaluating both biblical and modern miracles.



SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. New Insights

Encourage the class to summarize new insights gained during the session. Use the questions provided on *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1B* to summarize their new insights.

2. A New Definition

You may want to formulate a new definition of the word "miracle," from the one they made earlier in the session, based on insights from the class discussion. This may be done as a collective effort, carefully evaluating different elements to be included in a proper understanding of a biblical miracle. Perhaps the earlier attempts at a definition at the

beginning of class should undergo some significant revisions. Hopefully some common misconceptions can be corrected and a more biblically-based understanding gained.

3. Case Study: Faith Healers on Television

Encourage the class to recall examples of faith healing they may have watched on television. How are these programs to be evaluated from a biblical perspective? Is there a biblical basis for conducting faith healing on television? Can we say that God is truly at work in these ministries or should we simply dismiss them as show biz? How does a Christian evaluate?

Use **INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters** to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

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