

## THE MIRACLE WORKER

I seldom enjoy getting on the subject of miracles. It is a fast way to get a lot of people annoyed at me, and sometimes even at each other. But we have been trying to take a fresh and honest look at who Jesus was and what He was like. That is a thing we can never do well enough, yet it is essential for us to keep trying. We cannot “follow” someone if we have no impressions or convictions about who they are, what they are like, or what they care about. I do not “see” anybody with perfect clarity – never mind Jesus. But that does not mean I do not want to, and it is no reason to stop trying.

We cannot be fair to the New Testament records, or to the stories those who knew Jesus tell about Him, if we do not acknowledge that Jesus had many special powers that often shocked and surprised His followers. His closest followers claim that Jesus was a Miracle Worker. We often get tangled up trying to understand what the stories are trying to tell us. And we have no way to be certain that we *do* understand. After all, if you understand a miracle, then by definition it ceases to be a miracle. And many people, not wanting to be bothered with understanding, claim that we should take everything at face value and let it go at that. But that relegates the whole subject of miracles to the realms of the meaningless. And that’s sad.

There is a story about Jesus feeding the five thousand. If this story means that Jesus created bread and fish out of thin air, then it is a meaningless story. Nobody else can do that. If that is the solution we are trying to claim for world hunger, we are idiots. At our low level of development, we still have to catch fish and grow grain to make bread. If we do not, we do not have food for ourselves or for anybody else. However, if the story reminds us of the power of sharing – which we partially know but frequently forget – then the miracle has many wondrous applications. And the early church took many of these applications to heart. Of course, our world is still wrestling with and quarreling over how best to apply the principles of sharing.

But one illustration does not cover or shed light on all the miracle stories. Part of the problem (not all of the problem, but part of the problem) is that our understanding of “reality” – the laws of physics – is very different today than it was in Jesus’ day. I do not mean to imply that we all understand the laws of physics in the same way today; a lot of physicists in our time sound a lot more “woo woo” to me than anything I read in the New Testament, nor do they all agree

with each other. In any case, we all live in a world that would have completely dumbfounded the twelve disciples. Light bulbs going on and off; jet planes taking off and landing; automobiles; open-heart surgery; skyscrapers; computers; cell phones; satellites. More people are healed at Hoag Hospital every day than Jesus healed in His entire ministry. With one exception, every one of us is living with more miracles every day than any of Jesus' followers ever imagined in their entire lifetimes. Among such huge miracles, there are two seemingly smaller ones. Every one of us has a privately owned copy of the holy scriptures in our own home. That would have been unbelievable in Jesus' time. Even more unbelievable, many of us own our own Bible and rarely bother to read it. Who could have imagined such a thing?

So some of us need to be reminded that honest questions are not an insult to God. Some events were described two thousand years ago in ways that made sense to *them* but which do not make any sense to us. Stars do not move around the sky at will and come to rest over Bethlehem to guide ancient seers to where the Messiah was born. Jesus may ascend up to Heaven spiritually, but ascending physically is not impressive to us. There is no "up" and Heaven is not geographically located, and they did not have to worry about Jesus rising high enough to go into orbit.

Walt Whitman once remarked that "a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels." ("Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*) That is, life itself is a miracle – life itself is answer enough to confound disbelief. The most profound answer you can make to a person who says "I don't believe in God" – the total rejection of that statement, if you can say it honestly – is "I love you." Is love a miracle, a natural law, a figment of human imagination, or what?

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One of the things that disturbs us, not only about others but about ourselves, is the tendency we have to be impressed by the stupid and the absurd more often than by the meaningful and the significant. There is the story of a yogi in training who studied and disciplined himself for twenty-five years until he could walk on water. He returned to his Master to show what he had accomplished, and then demonstrated by walking across the Ganges River. "You are very foolish indeed," said the Master. "The ferryman takes me across the river for ten cents. You have spent twenty-five years of your life to accomplish something that is only worth ten cents."

If I could fly up and touch the ceiling at the end of each service – perhaps give the benediction from up there – we would not have enough space to seat all the people who would come flocking here every Sunday. But alas, God has not blessed me with such a great and miraculous power. God has merely given me life, a wondrous wife, children, friends I love, a truth to live for – a Savior who died for me and you – and the promise of an Eternal Kingdom to live in and for. Yet if only I could fly up and touch the ceiling, that would be worth coming to church for?

But enough of that. A more important issue for those of us wanting to know and be faithful to Jesus is the question of why He did as many miracles as He did. In the wilderness temptations following His baptism, Satan tried to entice Jesus into basing His whole ministry on miraculous powers. Satan knew that Jesus was highly gifted and that God would back Him up if He chose to use them. Actually this is true of all of us to some degree, though some of us have never acknowledged it. In any case, Jesus ended up replying that we are not to put God to the test – we are not to live as if we are special cases, or as if life’s principles do not apply to us. Asking God for favors not granted to God’s other children is not the WAY of community *or* of love.

Why then did Jesus *ever* heal or do any of the miracles? It seems clear to me that Jesus was cautious about using His special powers. It does not always show, but I suspect He was constantly requesting permission in His prayers. Often He requested people to keep quiet about it – to not spread the news. Of course, not all of them listened to Him, and that put more and more emphasis on His miraculous abilities. If more and more people wanted special miracles for themselves, rather than wanting to trust God and to live in and for the Kingdom that Jesus was announcing, what would happen to Jesus’ purpose and mission? It would turn the attention onto “What can God do for me?” rather than on “How can I come to know and serve God?” Jesus seemed to know that the real miracles that God could do for people did not happen until they were themselves most concerned for loving and obeying God.

It also seems clear to me that Jesus was troubled by the attention that the miracles focused on His own person. He constantly pointed to the power of God, which was their real source. It is an old but interesting thing to ponder. It was as if Jesus was the agent of God’s power without having much control over it Himself. It was as

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though His capacity to heal was simply one of the results of His own surrender – of His opening Himself to the will and presence of God. As long as He stayed in this relationship, that power was simply in and around Him. He had the responsibility of it, but not the choice of turning it off or on.

Perhaps you are now aware of why I dislike raising the subject of miracles. The topic itself raises so many feelings in people and so little logic and reason – so little intelligible definition – that it is hard to communicate. If it should suddenly be revealed that every miracle Jesus ever performed could be explained by some undramatic, unbelieving explanation, I would still call Jesus the Miracle Worker on the sheer weight of the evidence that everywhere He went, the unlikely, the lost, the misplaced potential for fullness of LIFE kept breaking forth into real blessings for real people. But many people are not impressed by that side of the subject. They would rather see someone fly up and touch the ceiling.

You remember the Gerasene Demoniac who came screaming down the hill, and the herd of pigs that stampeded into the lake? Well, that was not really a miracle. You see, the man's screaming and yelling frightened the pigs and caused them to stampede. Then Jesus convinced the man that the sickness that was inside his mind had fled into the pigs and was destroyed. This makes it quite clear that Jesus did not really perform a miracle at all. He merely faked the man out of a massive schizophrenic psychosis and tricked him back into sanity. Now we can go home comforted by the realization that Jesus was just an ordinary man like everyone else. And I do not have to wonder why such amazing things kept happening everywhere He went, and that somehow they did not seem to happen very often when Jesus was not present.

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If we are willing to live in the twenty-first century, even when we come to church, and if the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord is truly here with us, to comfort and guide and inspire us – ever leading us to our rightful purposes and assignments – then what do Jesus' miracles have to do with us?

Many of us have already had times in our lives when we needed some miracles from the Holy Spirit to get our own lives healed enough to get us back on track. That is the source of deep gratitude and even

love for many of us. We go on asking for such miracles for those we care about and love. We hope that this place – this faith family – will help others to find such miracles in their own lives. Gratefully we notice that it does continue to happen.

But as always with Jesus, there is a lot more behind the scenes than we notice at first. Jesus did not put a lot of weight on the healing miracles. I do not think we like that very much at first, but it is true nonetheless. And if Jesus did not put much weight on the healing miracles in His own time, will that not remain true in our time?

It is clear, I think, that Jesus was compassionate toward those with physical ailments. He did not like pain or sin or evil. From His perspective, people who were suffering were in some kind of bondage to Satan. He had enough authority from God to release them from Satan's power. It is interesting to me how often Jesus is annoyed – quietly angry – when He heals. Satan has no right to treat God's children in such ways. Jesus DRIVES Satan and his minions away. It is not a polite request. Jesus goes into battle against the powers of darkness. (Luke 11:20) They are not safe when Jesus is around. I sometimes wonder why they feel so safe when *we* are around. Have we no authority from God – no authority from the Holy Spirit? Of course, some of us have to translate the language a little to make sure we are still understanding, but that ought to be second nature to us by now.

Anyway, Jesus does not put a lot of weight on the healing miracles. Healing is not even close to His top purpose. His top purpose is to announce – to invite and bring people into – the Kingdom of God, which is available here and now, yet not in its fulfillment. When we listen and respond, we repent. That is, we turn and head in a new direction. We head for a different reality, a different Kingdom – a place of wonders here and wonders unfolding. That is bigger, far more important – as Jesus kept reminding us – than food or drink or shelter or health or anything else in the physical realms as we know them.

Jesus does not put a lot of weight on the healing miracles because they are far too limited. Physical healing is wonderful, but far too limited. Do you have to be eighty-two years old to truly know that? If you heal me at twenty-three (which He did, of testicular cancer), how long will that last?

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When I was a boy, many young men were dying all over the world in the Second World War. It was a tragedy. They would never have families, jobs, a chance to explore or experience very much of life. Those who survived were seen as lucky, fortunate – sometimes miraculously spared. But the difference between those who died and those who survived seems very different now. Now, only a short time later, we do not know *any* who have survived.

If Jesus was after only temporary, fleeting survival, what kind of Savior or Messiah would He be? Healing miracles have severe limitations. What percentage of those with physical ailments in the year A.D. 30 was Jesus able to heal? If He had healed day and night, seven days a week, and never had time to preach or teach, to train His disciples, or to die on a Cross, would that have improved the world? Jesus had to prioritize, pray constantly, choose His mission carefully, and stay focused on what God was calling Him to do. So do you, if you want to be a faithful follower.

Everybody that Jesus healed is long dead. But His Kingdom lives on and He calls many of us into it to this day, and for many years to come. And if He did not mislead us, His Kingdom is forever.

There is another limitation to the healing miracles. Does everybody who gets healed help with the mission and the true purpose? It seem logical to some of us that this would be so, but very frequently it is not. There seems to be little correlation between being physically healed and being spiritually converted. Sometimes the two coincide, but not very often. Switching from pride to humility – and from Law to Grace – is a much deeper experience for most of us. It requires more than a physical brokenness.

And finally, shall we dare to wander into the deeper spiritual dimensions, where healing and forgiveness meet – where the connections between our spiritual condition and our estrangement from God are intertwined? What happens when the threads start coming together? When the things Jesus tried to teach us and reveal to us begin to register all across the teachings and the stories? We are grateful for forgiveness, but some very surprising people do not feel fully forgiven. The most adamant requirement on the Christian Path is the requirement to forgive all brothers and sisters who are repentant – who want back in to a love relationship with God and with us. It is built into the Lord's Prayer. It is proclaimed in teaching after teaching. (Mark 11:26 [KJV, NASB]; Luke 17:3-4) If you will not forgive your brother or sister, God will not forgive you. Period. There are no exceptions.

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Forgiveness, in the New Testament meaning, is the full restoration of a relationship. If God forgives you, you are back “in” all the way. No games. No escape clauses. Christianity uncorrupted believes that God will never turn away any person who wants a restored relationship with God. But that puts a great responsibility and requirement on those who want to walk the Christian WAY. Receive the forgiveness offered in Christ Jesus, with confidence and rejoicing and great gratitude, and *always* be willing to extend it to others who repent – who turn toward the New WAY.

So which is easier, “*to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’?*” (Luke 5:23) Healing and forgiveness are not separable in Jesus’ mind. Furthermore, love comes from forgiveness. That’s not what most of us think, but that’s what Jesus thinks. “*If a person is forgiven little, they love little.*” (Luke 7:47) If you want more love in your life, learn how to receive more forgiveness.

Whatever the physical side of healing may be, the spiritual side of healing is knowing and accepting that you are forgiven.

In any case, Jesus *was* a Miracle Worker – and a Healer. But Jesus knew the deep principles behind such things a lot more clearly than most of us realize.