

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

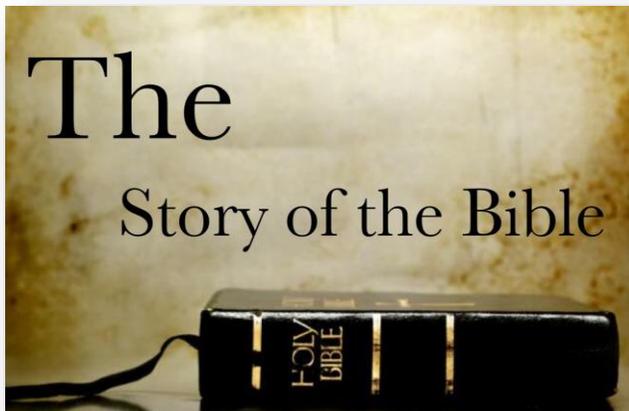
October 18, 2016

As we wrap up these several ponderings and sermons about miracles, you may remember that the definitions I've used for "miracle" are (1) "an interference with Nature by supernatural power,"¹ and "an event that is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time and place that the event occurs."² In this *Laptop* I want to explore with you where such things are found in the Bible.



As I began to research this some years ago, the first thing I did was to examine all the English words used to communicate the idea of a miracle in various translations of the Bible. Those words include "miracles," "signs," "wonders," "works," "mighty works," "portents," and "power." There are nuances of meaning between these seven terms, but the differences are slight. For example, a "sign" (σημεῖον) points to something beyond itself, to spiritual reality, and a "wonder" refers to a sense of jaw-dropping awe in the presence of the supernatural. (The Greek word from which we get "wonder" [τρεφας] is also the word from which we get "terror.")

Thanks to the convenience of computer software, I printed out every verse that uses one of these words. This presumably created a list of every miraculous event recorded in the Bible. While I'm sure that I've missed some, I was surprised at what I found. How many specific miracles would you guess are recorded in the whole Bible? Fifty? A hundred? Five hundred? A thousand?



I imagine that various people might count them differently, but my list includes eighty-seven miracles, of which forty-three are in the Old Testament and forty-four are in the New Testament. That's not as many as I expected, especially over a period of two thousand years. **If they occurred at equal intervals, that means that the Bible records one miraculous event—one—every twenty-three years.**

As I continued to look at the data, though, I noticed that miraculous events don't seem to be equally spaced across the two thousand years of biblical history. Miracles actually seem to cluster around four periods of time: (1) the period of creation through the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, an unspecified length of time; (2) the period of Moses and Joshua, about seventy years; (3) the period of Elijah and Elisha, about seventy years; and (4) the period of the New Testament, about seventy years.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 10.

² William Lane Craig, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 62.

This means that, out of two thousand years of biblical history, miracles seemed to occur during only about two hundred years. Further, these four seasons of miracles were all pivotal periods in biblical history. The first period, the period of creation, was when God was planting human life on this planet. The second period, the period of Moses and Joshua, was when God was establishing the nation of Israel as a chosen people.

The third period, the period of Elijah and Elisha, was when God was trying to call the ten northern tribes of Israel back to repentance prior to their complete destruction.

And the period of the New Testament, of course, was when God was establishing the New Israel, a spiritual nation composed of those who follow Jesus as God's one and only Son, who was crucified and resurrected to bring us healing and eternal life.



After studying the four clusters of biblical miracles, I examined my list to see whether I could identify categories or classes of miraculous events. Others have made similar efforts, but my own list ended up with nine categories. (Various tables and charts are appended to this *Laptop*.)

The first category of miraculous events I've called **Miracles of Original Creation**. For decades, now, the Big Bang theory of creation has been widely accepted as science's best understanding of how the universe came into being. Physics texts read a lot like Genesis 1 at this point: at some point in the far distant past, there was *Nothing*; an instant later, there was *Something*, and a whole lot of it! Not only did God create matter, but God also created morality, when God created humankind, gave us free will, and set boundaries for its use.

God's instructions to Adam and Eve are our first example of the second category of miraculous events, which I call **Miracles of Propositional Revelation**. Propositional revelation is truth that can be stated clearly, written down, reflected on, and in many cases, verified through experimentation. The Bible itself is propositional revelation—truths about Reality given to us by our Creator.

I would suggest to you that all new knowledge, whether the space and time reality we discover in science or the spiritual reality we discover in the Bible, comes to us through "aha!" moments of inspiration and insight—through understanding that is "*given*." I would also suggest that these first two types of miracles, though not what we usually think about as "miracles," are in fact the miracles we're most likely to personally experience.

I call the third category of miraculous events **Miracles of Multiplication**. Similar to Miracles of Original Creation, Miracles of Multiplication involve taking food and somehow causing it to last longer than or to serve more than is ordinarily possible. These miracles include Elijah's multiplication of the widow's food (1 Kings 17:12-16), Elisha's multiplication of the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1-7), and the prophets' food (2 Kings 4:42-44), and Jesus' feeding of five thousand people on one occasion and four thousand people on another (Matthew 14:15-21, 15:32-38).

The fourth category is the smallest, with only two instances. For lack of a better idea, I call these **Miracles of Inorganic Healing**. Elisha performed both of these miracles. On one occasion, Elisha purified a spring that was killing the crops (2 Kings 2:19-22), and on another, he purified some stew that had been poisoned (2 Kings 4:38-41).

Miracles of Organic Healing are the fifth category. These are miracles of physical healing, and are probably the miracles we usually think of first. Some of the diseases whose healing is recorded in the Bible include a number of healings of leprosy or skin disease, healing of lameness and crippled conditions, healing of paralysis, healing of fever, healing of shriveled limbs, healing of muteness, several healings of blindness, and healing of amputated body parts.

While Moses, Elisha, Peter, and Paul also performed miracles of this sort, more than twice as many healings are reported of Jesus than of everyone else put together, and the record is clear that “*Jesus’ disciples saw him do many other miraculous signs besides the ones recorded in this book*” (John 20:30).

The sixth category is **Miracles of Power over Animals**. These miracles include Moses’ miracle plagues of frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, and locusts (Exodus 8-10), and three miracles that Jesus performed with fish. Jesus’ miracles were the fish that Peter caught that had a coin in its mouth, and the two overwhelming catches of fish at Jesus’ direction following nights of fruitless effort (Matthew 17:24-27; Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-14).



The seventh category of miraculous events is another one we frequently think of first. I call this category **Miracles of Power over Nature**. Here we find Noah’s flood (Genesis 6:1-8:22), the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-25), Moses’ plagues of blood, hail, and darkness (Exodus 7-10), the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14), the destruction of Jericho (Joshua 6), Jesus’ turning water into wine (John 2:1-11), walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-23), and calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41).

The eighth category is **Miracles of Power over Spirits**. All of these miracles occur in the New Testament, with five out of seven of them being performed by Jesus. Each of these miracles had to do with the healing or exorcising of a person with a demon or an evil spirit.

The Gospels record eight different occasions when Jesus exorcised, or expelled, demons from people. On three of these occasions, Jesus seems to have healed many people from demon possession;³ the other five occasions involved the exorcism of specific persons: a boy, a girl, a woman, and two men.⁴ On more than one occasion, the demons themselves authenticated who Jesus was, crying out, “*I know who you are—the Holy One sent from God!*”

We do well to note that, unlike healers today, Jesus never used any gimmicks in His healing. He never whipped people up into an emotional frenzy. Jesus never charged for His healing, and Jesus never had any failures.

Finally, the ninth category is **Miracles of Power over Death**. Most, but not all, of these miracles had to do with bringing dead persons back to life. By my count, such resurrections occurred eight times in the Bible: Elijah raised one person (1 Kings 17:17-24); Elisha raised two (2 Kings 4:18-37, 13:20-21); Peter and Paul raised one each (Acts 9:38-40, 20:9-11), and

³Matthew 12:15-71; Luke 6:17-26, 7:18-35, and parallels.

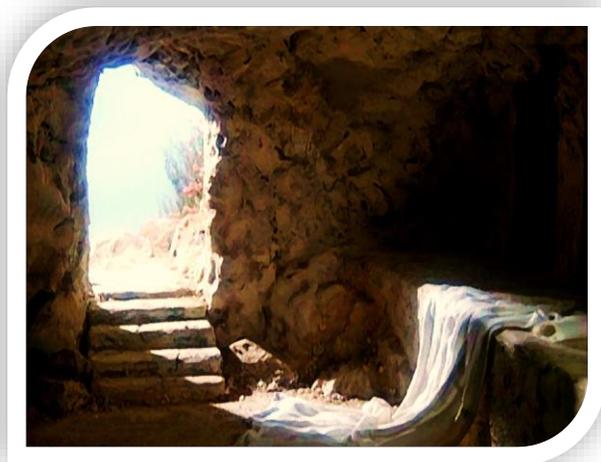
⁴ Luke 4:31-37, 8:1-3, 26-39; Mark 7:24-30, 9:14-29, and parallels.

Jesus raised three . . . besides Himself. Those persons were Jairus's daughter, the widow's son, and Lazarus (Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 7:11-16; John 11:1-45).

So where have we come after all this? We've discovered that the Bible records something less than one hundred specific miracles, that these miracles are of nine types, and that nearly all of them took place during three brief periods of about seventy years each.

Over the course of biblical history, miracles were actually quite rare. *Many of God's finest servants never, ever saw a miracle. It's the telescoping of history on the pages of the Bible that gives us the impression that miracles were very common.*

What we learn from all this is that **the miracles recorded in the Bible are credential signs. These miracles were signs given to authenticate God's message at the hinge points of spiritual history**, and these miracles were given in the forms best adapted to the requirements of the age.



Miracles were given to prove that Moses and Joshua were truly acting at God's direction in the establishment of the Chosen People and the giving of the Law. Miracles were given to authenticate the warnings of Elijah and Elisha that being the Chosen People was not an eternal guarantee, and that Israel would be destroyed if the people did not repent. And miracles were given to authenticate Jesus' words that He was the Son of God, come to establish a New Israel: *"Even though you do not believe me," Jesus said, "believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father"* (John 10:38).

Biblical writers frequently asked God to do mighty works. Many—perhaps most—of the Psalms praise God for past mighty works, and beg God to perform new ones. We do that, too. But contrary to what we may think or prefer, C. S. Lewis pointed out that . . .

*"God does not shake miracles into Nature at random as if from a pepper-caster. They come on great occasions: they are found at the great ganglions of history—not of political or social history, but of that spiritual history which cannot be fully known by men. If your own life does not happen to be near one of those great ganglions, how should you expect to see one? . . . Nor, if we understand, shall we be anxious to do so. . . . Miracles and martyrdoms tend to bunch about the same areas of history—areas we have naturally no wish to frequent."*⁵

Finally, whatever you make of all this, **the Bible tells us that there are at least two kinds of miracles that God absolutely guarantees. The good news is that these two miracles are the only two that are essential for our well being.**

So what are these two miracles?



⁵ C.S. Lewis, p. 174.

1. The first one is found in Jeremiah 29:13:
“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”
2. The second one is found in 1 John 1:9:
“If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.”

For these, and for all of God’s other miracles in our lives, we give hearty thanks to our Father, from whom all good things come!

Dave

