

“Miracles Today - 2014”

Acts 8:26-39 ¹

In recent weeks we've defined a miracle as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power,”² “an event that is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time and place that the event occurs.”³ We've looked at the philosophical problem of miracles. We've looked at miracles in the Bible. We've looked at Jesus' Resurrection, the Grand Miracle. And today we turn to a consideration of miracles in our own time.

I'd like to invite you to think with me this morning about two kinds of contemporary miracles: **Miracles of Timing** and **Miracles of New Creation**. These are the miracles I think you and I are most likely to see or to experience. I'll post an addendum about **Miracles of Healing** with the online version of this sermon.

Miracles of Timing have to do with sequence and synchronicity. Miracles of New Creation have to do with the ways in which God draws persons to salvation. I could tell personal stories about both of these, but this morning I want to tell you about two experiences my friend, Nik Ripken, recounted in his powerful book, *The Insanity of God*.⁴ They have a lot in common with Philip's experience with the Ethiopian official on the road to Gaza

Pramana's Dream.⁵ While Nik was returning home several years ago from visiting persecuted believers in China, he had an opportunity to spend a few days in a large, very strict Islamic nation. During that short visit, a forty-three year-old Muslim-background believer somehow learned through the grapevine that a Westerner had come to his country wanting to discover how Muslims were finding Jesus and what challenges these converts were experiencing as they lived out their faith in hostile environments. Here's how Nik told the story:

“It turns out that Pramana traveled twenty-nine hours to find me. He had lived his entire life in a remote, tropical, and rural region of his third-world country. He had never before been on a bus. He had not even traveled on a paved highway. Yet, somehow, he found me in one of his country's major cities. Upon his arrival, he matter-of-factly announced: ‘I have heard about what you are doing. You need to hear my story also.’

“This man had been born into a people group with a population of twenty-four million. In his people group, there were only three known followers of Jesus, and no church. The only religion that he had ever practiced or known while growing up had been a sort of folk Islam. Pramana knew the Quran by rote. He couldn't actually speak Arabic, so he simply memorized the words of the book as if they were part of some sort of magic formula. He knew the story of Mohammad, of course. But he had never heard of anybody called Jesus, he had never met a believer, and he had no idea what a Bible was.

“Five years ago,’ he told me, ‘my life was in ruins. My wife and I were always fighting; I was ready to divorce the woman. My children were disrespectful. My animals were not growing or multiplying. My crops were dying in the fields. So I went to the imam of the nearest mosque for help.’

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on May 4, 2014.

² C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 10.

³ William Lane Craig, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 62.

⁴ Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013).

⁵ Ripken, pp. 265-268.

“The imam, who also functioned as the local spiritualist, told him, ‘Okay, son, here is what you need to do. Go buy a white chicken. Bring it to me and I will sacrifice it on your behalf. Then, go back to your village to meditate and fast for three days and three nights. On the third day, you will receive the answer to all the problems that you are having with your wife, your children, your animals, and your crops.’

“Pramana did exactly as he was told. He went back to his village. He meditated, he fasted, and he waited. Then, as he explained it: ‘I’ll never forget, on that third night, a voice without a body came to me after midnight. That voice said, **“Find Jesus, Find the Gospel.”**”

“This Muslim man had no clue what that meant. He didn’t know if Jesus might be a fruit or a rock or a tree. Pramana told me that the voice without a body also said, ‘Get out of bed, go over the mountain, and walk down the coast to _____ (a city to which he had never been). When you get to that city at daybreak, you will see two men. When you see those men, ask them where _____ street is. They will show you the way. Walk up and down that street and look for this number. When you find the number, knock on the door. When the door opens, tell the person why you have come.’

“Pramana assumed that he was required to obey what he had been instructed to do. So he went. He didn’t even tell his wife that he was leaving, let alone where he was going. It turns out that he would be gone for two full weeks. During that time, his family had no idea where he was.

“Pramana simply got out of bed, hiked over the mountain, trekked down the coast, and arrived in the specified city the next morning at daylight. He saw two men who told him where to find the street he wanted. He walked up and down that street until he found a building with the right number on it. He knocked on the door. A moment later, an older gentleman opened the door and asked, ‘Can I help you?’

“The younger man declared: ‘I have come to find Jesus; I have come to find the gospel!’ In a flash, the old man’s hand shot out from the darkened doorway. He grabbed Pramana by the shirt, dragged him into the apartment, and slammed the door behind him. The old man released his grip and exclaimed, ‘You Muslims must think I am a fool to fall for a trap as transparent as this!’

“The very startled and confused traveler replied, ‘I don’t know if you are a fool or not, sir. I just met you. But here is why I’ve come.’ Then Pramana told the older man the story of how he had come to be there that day.

“The Holy Spirit of the Living God had led this young Muslim man through his dream and vision and his obedience to the home of one of only three believers in his twenty-four million people group. Stunned, the older man explained the gospel to this young Muslim man and led him to Christ. For the next two weeks, the old man disciplined this new convert in the faith.

“That had been five years ago. Now, Pramana had traveled twenty-nine hours to share how his life had changed since he had found Jesus. There had been blessings and trials and tribulations during the last five years, but his life had clearly been changed in startling ways.” And we gave thanks to God!

Five Men at the Airport,⁶ On another trip, this time to Southeast Asia, Nik received an email from a European doctor who lived and worked on the border of two Central Asia countries that were experiencing a great deal of violence and unrest. The words of his email were guarded and carefully worded. The message read: “Dr. Ripken, I have heard about the research that you are

⁶ Ripken, pp. 275-282.

doing from a friend I knew and worked closely with in Somalia some years ago. I believe that the Lord needs you to come to _____ (and he named his border town).”

Nik explained that his schedule was full but that he planned to be back in the area the next year and would be very happy to visit at that time. After visiting for several days in the countryside around Bangkok, Nik received a more insistent email: “I really think you should come now.”

Nik declined again as he headed to another country where he had appointments with eighteen pastors. Just before his arrival, Nik was told that all eighteen pastors had been arrested and were in jail. His host told him, “This will not be a good time for you to visit us, unless you want to stay a lot longer than you had planned!”

Nik turned around and returned to Bangkok, where another email was waiting from the doctor. Nik replied, “Please stop asking me to visit; I am not coming to your country at this time!”

As Nik prepared for the next set of appointments he’d made, word came that several of the pastors he expected to visit had been in a car wreck. Several others were sick in the hospital, and several others were under tight surveillance. Another set of plans was now cancelled.

As Nik returned to Bangkok, there was yet another email from the doctor: “I really believe God wants you to come here now.” This time, Nik replied, “It suddenly looks like I really don’t have anything else to do for the next couple of weeks. I guess I’ll be coming your way after all.” Here’s how Nik told the rest of the story:

“I flew into the capital city of his country, then traveled on to a smaller city. From there, I took a smaller plane that landed on a short dirt runway outside a small border town. As soon as I exited the airplane, I spotted the man who was obviously the doctor. Standing beside him were five men in traditional Muslim dress who also seemed to be waiting at the remote desert airstrip for my plane to land.

“As the doctor and I exchanged greetings, I asked him, ‘Who are your friends?’

“‘You don’t know who they are?’ he reacted in surprise.

“No, I didn’t know even who you were until thirty seconds ago,” I told him.

“Well, Dr. Ripken,’ he said, as he cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, ‘If you don’t know these men—and if I don’t know these men—then we have a serious security problem. They told me that they had come to meet you.’

“So,’ he continued rather abruptly, ‘I’m going to have to leave you now. Here’s my cell phone number. If everything turns out all right, call me, and I’ll come back and get you.’ Then he turned and walked away.

“I was stunned. As I dragged my bag toward the small terminal, I was thinking about how quickly I could catch a flight out. The men followed me. They tugged on my clothes trying to get me to stop. I tried my best to ignore them. Finally, one of them said in broken English, ‘Sir, stop. Please stop. We are followers of Jesus.’

“I immediately stopped and turned to listen to what they had to say. The quick summary of their story rang true. Against my better judgment, but sensing the hand of God on our meeting, I went with my five unnamed new ‘friends’ to a room that they had rented in the nearby town.

“When we got there, we sat down together on the floor in an unfurnished apartment. They simply looked at me and smiled. I had no idea what was expected of me. I shared briefly about myself, though my words were more guarded than usual. I talked a little about where I had been, how I had been traveling around the world, the research that I had done, and why I wanted to talk to believers in different parts of the world. I also suggested why I might have been brought to them.

“One of the men spoke English. He translated my words to the others. After he finished, all five of the men began to laugh. I was confused and I wanted to know what they thought was so funny. They shook their heads, smiled, and said to me, ‘You may think you know why you have come here. But we would like to tell you why you are really here.’

“They briefly sketched their own personal stories. They had each had dreams or visions that had raised spiritual questions and prompted a long search for answers. They had each miraculously found a copy of the Bible to study. After reading through the entire Bible several times, they had each, on their own, decided to follow Jesus.

“They had each been rejected and disowned by their families. Eventually they had to flee their country. They made their way across the border to this small border town. Somehow, they had found each other and they realized that they all shared the same newfound faith in Christ.

“They didn’t really know what to do next, but they instinctively started meeting in this tiny third-floor apartment. They met daily from midnight until 3:00 in the morning, hoping that no one would notice them. They read the word of God secretly and tried to provide spiritual support and encouragement for one another.

“Two months earlier, they explained, they had started praying this prayer: ‘Oh God, we don’t know how to do this! We grew up and were trained as Muslims. We know how to be Muslims in a Muslim environment. We even know how to be communists in a Muslim environment. But we do not know how to follow Jesus in a Muslim environment. Please, Lord, send us someone. Send us someone who knows about persecution, someone who knows what other believers are doing, someone who can encourage and teach us.’

“Chills were running up and down my spine as they explained what had happened when they had been together in this same rented upper room earlier that very day: **‘At 1:30 this morning, we were here praying when the Holy Spirit told us to go to the airport. The Holy Spirit told us that we were to go to the first white man who got off the plane. The Holy Spirit told us that He was sending this man to answer our questions.’**

“So,’ they said as they smiled at me again, ‘that is why you are here. Now you can do what God has called you here to do. Before you start teaching us, however, we have one other question for you: Where have you been and what have you been doing for these last two months?’

“I shook my head in embarrassment. I confessed, ‘Well . . . I guess I have been being disobedient! I tried my best for weeks not to come here at all. Please forgive me!’

“They did. And we had a great time of teaching and learning from each other over the next few days. I listened to each of their personal testimonies of faith and asked them specific questions about the details of how and when they encountered Jesus and became His followers.

“One of the five men told me, ‘I dreamed about a blue book. I was driven, consumed really, by the message of the dream. “Look for this book,” the dream said, “read this Bible!” I began a secret search, but I could not find a book like that anywhere in my country. Then, one day, I walked into a Quranic book shop and saw this sea of green books lining the walls. I noticed a book of a

different color on a shelf in the back of the store, so I walked back there and pulled out a thick blue volume to discover that it was a Bible. It was published in my own national language. I actually bought a Bible in the Islamic bookstore, took it home, and read it five times. That's how I came to know Jesus.'

"Another one told me, 'I dreamed about finding Jesus, but I didn't even know how or where to look. Then one day I was walking through the market when a man I had never seen before came up to me in the crowd. He said, "The Holy Spirit told me to give you this book." He handed me a Bible and disappeared into the crowd. I never saw him again. But I read the Bible he gave me three times from cover to cover, and that's how I came to know and follow Jesus.'

"Each one of the five men told me a different variation of this same story. Each one of them had come across a Bible in some unusual, miraculous way. Each one had read the Gospel story of Jesus. Each one had decided to follow Him.

"Much, much later, after years of gathering stories, I came to understand that the tales told by these five new friends were actually pretty commonplace. Time and again, in the years since, Muslim-background believers from many different countries and cultures have told me about being directed by dreams and visions. They have told me about finding Bibles through amazing circumstances.

"They have mentioned reading the Bible multiple times. In the reading, they have talked about feeling drawn to Jesus. They have told me of a personal decision to follow Him. Many of those pilgrimages to faith involved a believer who miraculously showed up at exactly the right time, in the right place, with the right words that finally pointed the seeker directly to Jesus."

So what do you think? Do miracles still happen today? I submit to you that God is willing to do whatever is necessary in order to get our attention and to draw us to faith in Jesus and obedience to Him. And so here's the question with which I close: **Has God spoken to you about something to which you have not yet responded in obedience?**

It may be that God is calling you to place your faith in Jesus so that you can be born again and begin the adventure for which God created you. If that's your situation, isn't it time to get on with God's purpose for your life?

It may be that God is calling you to some other kind of commitment of time, resources, or vocation, but you have delayed and dawdled and are on the brink of missing God's purpose. Do you want your life to count for eternity, or not? **What would you do if you were not afraid?**

This benediction was part of a letter written by Southern Baptist Missionary to Iraq, Karen Watson, prior to leaving for the Middle East. The letter was dated March 7, 2003. Karen was killed, along with four other missionaries, on March 15, 2004.

***Care more than some think is wise.
Risk more than some think is safe.
Dream more than some think is practical.
Expect more than some think is possible.***

**We are called not to comfort or success but to obedience.
*There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving him.***

“Keep Sending Missionaries,” *Baptist Press* (3-24-04)

There’s more

Miracles of Healing

I suspect that the first thing most of us think about when we hear the word “miracle” has something to do with physical healing, and the truth of the matter is that much of the healing that we enjoy through modern medicine is, in the last analysis, very nearly miraculous. While there is much that we do understand, there are also many cases in which physicians know that certain medicines and procedures work, but they don’t always know why or how they work.

At the same time, while most healing may be understandable in principle, I suspect that many of us have known of situations in which spontaneous remission of disease has occurred in ways for which the attending physicians had no explanation. Larry Dossey, former Medical Chief of Staff of Humana Medical City Dallas, wrote that “*Every* physician, in the course of practicing clinical medicine, becomes a collector of bizarre observations, cases that do not fit the norm, that he or she files away secretly over the years.”¹

Further, Dr. Dossey wrote that “Sickly saints and healthy sinners show us that there is no invariable, linear, one-to-one relationship between one’s level of spiritual attainment and the degree of one’s physical health.”² While they were not God’s original purpose for creation, until the New Creation comes, sickness and disease will continue to affect the fallen creation, including those who follow Jesus.

Jesus didn’t heal everyone He met. Neither did Paul, and neither did the early Apostles. And when Jesus healed a man born blind (John 9:1-3), He indicated that there are sometimes purposes for illness that we can’t understand. While *the time will come* when God speaks a new creation into being, a creation that will have no more death or sorrow or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4), until that Day comes, God grants us no immunity from sickness and sorrow in a sin-shattered world.

One frequently-cited passage about healing that needs to be considered is this one from James: “*Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven*” (James 5:14-15).

The last page of this document will examine these verses in more detail, but one important thing to remember is that James, the half-brother of the Lord, who wrote these words, apparently died a martyr’s death for his confession that Jesus was alive again after His crucifixion.³ That in itself demonstrates that this promise is not a blanket guarantee that it is not God’s purpose for Christians to suffer.

The truth of the matter is that God frequently uses our sickness, pain, and sorrow to teach us more about Himself and about the deep things of faith. And as we struggle through such times, Calvary’s Cross gives eloquent witness to the fact that God is for us, not against us.

While God can and does use miraculous healing for His own purposes—usually as a witness to unbelievers—most of the time Christians experience similar illnesses to unbelievers. Remember that when Paul begged God to remove his “thorn in the flesh,” God told him, “*My gracious favor is all you need. **My power works best in your weakness***” (2 Corinthians 12:9). When Paul wrote to Timothy, “*I left Trophimus sick in Miletus*” (2 Timothy 4:20), he was telling us a great deal about how God works.

¹ Larry Dossey, M.D., *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 38. We are enjoined to prayer and even anointing with oil in prayer for physical healing (James 5:14-16), which may explain some such occurrences. Nevertheless, it is clear that God does not intend for all illness to be healed in this life, and that death itself is our Final Healing.

² Dossey, p. 15.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_the_Just

The fact is that while our testimonies to God's wondrous power do sometimes include inexplicable physical healing, we're called on far more often to give testimony to God's goodness, grace, and power while we're suffering. That's what unbelievers want to see as they watch our lives.

It's certainly not wrong to pray for healing, and when I'm sick or when persons I love are sick, that's what I'm going to do. At the same time, I hope that I'll be able to face such troubles as Jesus faced the Cross. In that situation, Jesus asked for what He wanted while also submitting Himself to the Father's purposes: "*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. **Yet not as I will, but as you will***" (Matthew 26:39).

I'm also challenged by Jesus' words, "*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. **Father, glorify your name!***" (John 12:27).

The obvious fact is that every single one of us is going to die, and there will be some mechanism—perhaps sickness—by which death comes. And while this is true, the Empty Tomb continues to remind us that all of our life on this earth is just the preface to the Real Story that lies beyond the grave.

As Paul put it, "*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. **For when I am weak, then I am strong***" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

The Question of Anointing with Oil for Healing

Anointing as a sign of holiness:

“Use this oil also to anoint Aaron and his sons, sanctifying them so they can minister before me as priests” (Exodus 30:30).

Anointing as a sign of God’s approval, selection, and blessing

“So Jesse sent for him. He was ruddy and handsome, with pleasant eyes. And the Lord said, ‘This is the one; anoint him’” (1 Samuel 16:12).

“You welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings” (Ps. 23:5).

Anointing as a means of physical healing

“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him” (Luke 10:34).

Not every sickness comes from sin (John 9:1-5); but some does (1 Cor. 11:30).

It is the *Power* behind the **Name** that heals: Acts 3:16, 9:32-34

Similar to our Pastors and Deacons

“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. And their prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make them well. And anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results” (James 5:14-16).

Symbolic: not rubbed or poured, as might be done with medicine

The ministry of intercession

Not confession through a required intermediary, such as a Catholic priest, but to a brother or sister priest. Also not “extreme unction”—this prayer is for healing, not for death.

For the Christian, every illness is healed, but this healing sometimes comes through physical death. It is not physical healing that is promised (2 Timothy 4:20).

The Mystery of the Body-Mind-Spirit Connection