

“Miracles in the Bible”

Exodus 14:15-31 ¹

Last week we looked at “The *Idea* of a Miracle.” Later this morning, we’ll look at Jesus’ Resurrection, “The *Grand Miracle*.” In two weeks, we’ll look at “Miracles *Today*.” Our task this hour is to look at “Miracles in the *Bible*.”

You may remember that last week I defined a “miracle” as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power”² and as “an event that is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time and place that the event occurs.”³ Our job today is to find out where things of that sort are recorded in the Bible, and to consider what we can learn from them.

As I began to study, 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” (σημειον) points to something beyond itself, to a spiritual reality, and a “wonder” refers to a sense of jaw-dropping “shock and awe” in the presence of the supernatural.⁴

Thanks to the convenience of Bible 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 different people might count them differently, but my list includes eighty-six miracles, of which forty-one are in the Old Testament and forty-five are in the New Testament. (This is not an exhaustive list, because I keep thinking of new ones.) That’s not as many as I expected, especially over a period of two thousand years. If they had occurred at equal intervals, that would mean that the Bible recorded one miraculous event—just 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. Though there are outliers here and there, 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.

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. In the first period, the period of creation, God was planting human life on this planet. In the second period, the period of Moses and Joshua, God was establishing the nation of Israel as a chosen people.

In the third period, the period of Elijah and Elisha, God was calling the ten northern tribes of Israel to repentance in an attempt to avoid their destruction. And in the fourth period, the period of the New Testament, God was establishing 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.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on April 20, 2014, Resurrection Sunday SonRise Service.

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 The Greek word from which we get “wonder” (τερας) is also the word from which we get “terror.”

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 ten categories. (These various lists will be posted online with this sermon.)

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 (!), expanding quickly into what would become the universe that we know today.

Among the Miracles of Original Creation, God also 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.

It seems to me that all new knowledge, whether the physical realities we discover through science or the spiritual realities we discover through the Bible, actually comes to us through "aha!" moments of inspiration and insight—through understanding that we experience as "*given*." I also suggest that these first two kinds of miracles, though we usually think of them as "General Revelation" and as "Special Revelation" rather than as "miracles," are in fact the miracles you and I are most likely to experience.

I call the third category of miraculous events **Miracles of Multiplication**. Miracles of Multiplication involve taking food and somehow causing it to last longer than it normally would or to serve more people than it normally could. 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 that I could find. For lack of a better idea, I call these **Miracles of Inorganic Healing**, and Elisha performed both of them. 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 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 other 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 involved the fish that Peter caught that had a coin in its mouth, and the two overwhelming catches of fish that followed nights of fruitless effort (Matthew 17:24-27; Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-14).

The seventh category of miraculous events is another that frequently comes to mind. 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), apparent slowing of the earth's rotation (Joshua 10:12-14); apparent reversal of the earth's rotation (2 Kings 20:9-11); 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 six out of eight of them being performed by Jesus. Each of these miracles had to do with the healing of a person possessed by a demon or an evil spirit.

Jesus cast demonic spirits out of a girl (Matthew 15:21-28), a boy (Mark 9:14-29), one woman (Luke 8:2), and three men (Matthew 12:22; John 4:33-36, 8:26-29).⁵ 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 (the last one I'll mention this morning; the other will be posted online with this sermon) is **Miracles of Power over Death**. 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 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? Well, we've discovered that the Bible records something less than one hundred specific miracles, that these miracles are of ten types, and that nearly all of them took place during three brief periods of about seventy years each.

The truth of the matter is that over the course of biblical history, miracles were actually quite rare. Many of God's finest and most famous 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 in biblical times.

I submit to you that what we learn from our study is that **the miracles recorded in the Bible are primarily 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 did not come with a guarantee that overlooked bad behavior. And miracles were given to authenticate Jesus' words that He was indeed the Son of God, come to establish God's Kingdom in a new and unexpected way: "*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).

⁵ Do we dare to conclude that women are more resistant to evil spirits?

Biblical writers frequently asked God to perform miracles. Many—and perhaps most—of the Psalms praise God for past miracles, and beg God to perform new ones. We do that, too. But contrary to what we may think or wish, “God does not shake miracles into Nature at random as if from a pepper [shaker]. 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.”⁶

As C. S. Lewis put it, “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.”⁷

Well, all of this raises some interesting questions about miracles in our own time, doesn’t it? We’ll wonder about some of those things when we look at “miracles today” in two weeks.

For today, we do well to remember that the point of every miracle is to get our attention and to invite our faith, such that every single one of us comes to the point of committing our lives to God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, as Kenisha has done this morning. We are called to push back the Darkness and build up His Kingdom . . . until He comes!

NOTE:

There is a tenth category of miracles about which I should warn you. This category is called **Miracles of Deception**. When we looked at the *idea* of miracles, I tried to make clear that miracles are events resulting from the intersection of what we call the natural universe with realms of reality that are other than our universe—from the super-Natural that lies beyond what we know.

It’s very important to remember that not everything that exists in the realm of the super-Natural is of God. In the hidden ages before our own creation, God granted some measure to free will to angels, as God would later grant free will to us. And one result of this was that, just as not every human person chooses to God, not every spirit being chooses to serve God, either. As Paul put it, “*We are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms*” (Ephesians 6:12).

These rebellious spirits seek the destruction of all humankind, and, because they are from beyond Nature, they have the ability to perform miracles within our world. The authentic miracles from God of which we have been speaking are credential signs. Biblical miracles were signs given to authenticate God’s message at the hinge points of spiritual history: the establishment of the Chosen People; the destruction of most of the Chosen People; and the establishment of a New Covenant through Jesus.

The miracles performed by servants of Darkness are intended to be credential signs as well. But, rather than revealing what God is doing, these signs are intended to deceive us and to distract

⁶ Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 174.

⁷ Ibid.

us from what God is doing. Jesus warned us that these Miracles of Deception may even deceive God's chosen ones (Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24; Revelation 13:13-15, 19:20).

So how can we tell miracles of Light from miracles of Darkness? The Bible tells us not to believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit of God, but to test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. *"Here is the way to find out if they have the Spirit of God,"* John wrote. *"If a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ became a human being, that person has the Spirit of God. If a prophet does not acknowledge Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist. You have heard that he is going to come into the world, and he is already here"* (1 John 4:1-3).

To say it another way, **the way to discover what sort of spirit lies behind a miraculous event is to find out whether that miracle-working spirit acknowledges the Grand Miracle. Does this miracle worker acknowledge that God became human in Jesus Christ, that Jesus died on the Cross, was raised from the dead, and now is Ruler over all that exists? If so, that spirit is from God. If not, that spirit is a servant of the Darkness.**

If you find yourself confronting an evil spirit, whether in human form or not, remember these two principles:

1. **Ask questions of the spirit.** What is your name? What do you want with me? Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh?
2. **If the spirit is evil, you have authority to banish and expel the spirit in the Name of Jesus.**

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons . . . (Luke 9:1).

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

[Jesus] has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him (1 Peter 3:22).

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 38-39).

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you (James 4:7-8).