***Miracles and Prayer - CA-027***

In New Testament Times, people delivered messages in languages that they had never learned. People were healed of terminally ill diseases. The dead were raised. Some believers today teach that we should expect to see the same miracles today. They say that, first of all, God never changes. God is immutable. We find this in Malachi 3:6, the last book of the Old Testament. The first part says, "For I the Lord do not change."

And then again, in Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever." So if people performed miracles under the Spirit of God then, then why shouldn't we be able to expect it now?

Secondly, our attention is called to the fact that Jesus spoke of miracles continuing after His departure from the earth. In John 14:1, Jesus told the apostles, "Truly, truly, I say to you. Whoever believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also, and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father." So Jesus said that there would be greater works than even He had done during his three years on earth, performed by His followers even after He left.

**Miracles in the Bible**

On the other hand, we have the believers who are called cessationists, and Berean Memorial church is in that camp. We believe that the gift of miracles and the sign gifts have ceased. So we must answer the question, why should we not expect to see mighty miracles (the gift of miracles) again? We answer, first of all, citing that the miracles of the Bible, for the most part, are clustered in three periods. The Bible covers several thousand years, and we only find three periods where we see regular, frequent, consistent miracles.

The first one we find from the Exodus of Israel out of Egypt and coming into the Promised Land. We can be sure that miracles were necessary. Living was tough in the desert. The people started out with almost no provisions. Moses was dealing with a whole generation of ex-slaves who had very little initiative, and they needed the confirmation of Moses as a leader (as God's prophet), and confirmation of God's hand in their history.

Then we see, after the arrival in the Promised Land, only a few miracles in the book of judges, and these are performed by men under the filling of the Holy Spirit. The key phrase is, "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him." But there are no widespread (almost wholesale) miracles, as we say, in the early days of the children of Israel leaving, and having left, Egypt.

Then the next stage of miracles is what we could call the prophetic period during the ministries of Elijah, and Elisha, and to a lesser extent, the prophet Isaiah.

After that, we see no more miracles until the apostolic period. This began about 30 A.D. with the public ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Regarding its ending, the very latest that it could have lasted was into the early 60s A.D. Miracles were necessary then. They had been promised by God as confirmation of the Messiah. They were necessary to confirm that Jesus was the Messiah; that the apostles were His servants; and, that the new covenant had been confirmed.

In answer to the assertion that God never changes, we have to agree completely that God's attributes (His character) never change. However, we do find in the Word of God that He changes His program (His manner of dealing with people). If you don't believe this, then you need to be offering animal sacrifices; you need to be living up to all 613 commandments of the Mosaic Law; you need to be celebrating the Passover by slaughtering a lamb; and, you need to be sure that whatever you do or don't do, that you don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because that has been forbidden. So we recognize that, although God does not change, He does change His program and His manner of dealing with people. And we would call your attention to the fact that Jesus' promise to the apostles was addressed to the apostles. We do know that the apostles performed miracles in the early days of the church in confirmation of the fact that they were indeed the Lord's chosen apostles, and that He was the Messiah.

**Tongues**

As for tongues, we see tongues in about four places in Acts. First of all, on the day of Pentecost, we see them as a sign to the Jewish people in confirmation of the prophecies of Isaiah that the Jewish people would hear people teaching things of God in non-Hebraic languages (in gentile languages). So we see that in Acts 2. Then in Acts 8, we see the Samaritans believing in Christ for salvation; getting saved; and, being filled with the Spirit. It doesn't say in Acts 8 that they actually spoke in tongues, but we can assume that they did because there was some kind of visible sign such that you knew that these Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit. So they probably did speak in in tongues – the Samaritans, who were neither Jews, nor technically gentiles.

Then in Acts 10, we see the gentile people welcomed into the church by Peter. He said, "Yes, as a good Jew, I never thought it would be possible, but I believe gentiles can be saved. I'll tell you why." You can read about this in Acts 10 and 11. Peter said, "I saw them. I heard them speaking in tongues just like we did at the beginning. So to me, that was a sign that they had received the Holy Spirit." Then again, in Acts 19, the apostle Paul goes to Ephesus, and he wanders into a synagogue of Messianic Jews. He senses that something is wrong, and he says, "When you people were baptized, did you receive the Holy Spirit?" And they said, "No, we've never even heard of the Holy Spirit. We were just baptized with John's baptism. We're expecting the messiah to come." So he told them about Jesus; they believed; then they spoke in tongues; and, Paul knew that they had become part of the church.

These were three ethnic groups: the Jews; the gentiles; and, the Samaritans. Then the people at Ephesus were Old Testament saints. They hadn't been brought into the church yet. So this was a valid sign that the Holy Spirit had come and taken residence in these people – that they were indeed a part of the church.

Then the only other place we read about tongues is in a context of error, where they are being corrected. Yes, the gift of tongues was still valid, but people were misusing it. Then we hear no more about the gift of tongues.

Augustine, who came a couple of hundred years later, wrote that in the early days of the church, they can read about people speaking in languages that they had never learned. But these things don't happen anymore. So, by looking at the history of the church, and by what has happened in the context, we have strong reason to believe that the sign gifts (the miraculous gifts) died out during the lifetime of the apostles.

In 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul makes an interesting allusion. He says, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you, with all perseverance, with signs and wonders and miracles." These were the signs of a true apostle. If the apostles are no longer on the scene, then we don't need signs to confirm a true apostle. Remember that an apostle was someone who had known Jesus in the flesh; who was an eyewitness of the resurrection; and, who had been appointed and confirmed as an apostle personally by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then there's another statement in Hebrews 2:1-3: "For this reason, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard so that we do not drift away from it. For if the words spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression in disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" This next statement is what I want to call your attention to. "After it was at first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed by those who heard." Notice the use of the past tense: "After it was confirmed (first spoken through the Lord when Jesus was on earth), then it was confirmed to us by those who heard (the eyewitnesses) – the people who were there. It was confirmed through their teaching and through the signs of an apostle. It is believed that the book of Hebrews was written in the early 60s A.D., probably about 61 A.D. Here the author, probably the apostle Paul (we don't know for sure) was speaking of the gospel being confirmed by eyewitnesses in the past tense. So apparently they didn't look for it to be confirmed by signs and wonders anymore.

What are the differences in the true gift of miracles in New Testament days (in the days of the apostles) and what we hear of today with people who claim that the gift of miracles is still in existence? All we have to do is look at the gift of miracles in the New Testament. First of all, remember that the gift of miracles extended to every kind of illness, including terminal illness, and even congenital illnesses, such as the man born blind. It even went to the point of raising the dead. This was not only someone who was dead, but as in the case of Lazarus, decay had already set into his body.

I heard a man a few years ago who had a school of spiritual healing. He would actually teach believers, he claimed, how to exercise the gift of healing. He said that if you have the gift of teaching, then you study the Bible, and you go take some classes at seminary to learn to exercise the gift of teaching. And the gift of healing was no different. You need to learn how to exercise the gift of healing, but he had a problem. He had to cancel one of his speaking engagements because he had a bad cold, and someone facetiously said, "Why don't you exercise the gift of healing on yourself?" And in all seriousness, he replied, "You know, I've never been able to heal a cold. I can heal all kinds of diseases, but I'm going to have to work on that. I just can't do colds."

But in the New Testament, the true gift of healing could heal polio; cancer; leprosy; or, whatever. The gift of healing was valid even to the point of raising the dead.

Another thing about the gift of healing in the New Testament was that healing was always instantaneous. I hear people talking today (well-meaning, sincere people), who tell about someone going to a meeting of someone who claims to have the gift of healing, and they weren't healed instantly, but, "You know, I think they're better. I think they're getting better slowly." This is not the gift of healing. In the gift of healing, we saw that people who were healed by the apostles and by the Lord Jesus Christ were instantly healed. Now, there was the case of one man who was blind, and Jesus laid hands on him. Then the man said, "I see men walking as trees." Jesus made some other move to minister to him. Then the man said, "Yes, I can see everything the way it is." But notice that this was with stages, and it wasn't gradual. It was instant. It was all there at one time within a few moments. So we see that what people claim as the gift of healing today in no way measures up to healing in apostolic days.

So we can safely say that what others claim to see today as the gift of healing and a great move of God in mighty miracles, isn't the New Testament gift of healing.

I heard another man on TV talking about how he had exercised his gift of healing, and cleaned out a whole school of the deaf – hundreds of students who were there for various reasons: born deaf; or, had diseases, or whatever. He had healed them all. In all seriousness, wouldn't that be wonderful if that *were* taking place today? If you had the gift of healing, you could just go down to the hospital, and walk down the halls, and just heal everybody. But in all seriousness, don't you think if something like that had happened (the way our news media love sensationalism), we would have been hearing about it all over the place? I've never heard about it except from this one man who claimed that it happened.

Now, let me make it really plain here that we don't believe God doesn't perform miracles, or that He may not choose to perform miracles sovereignly today in answer to prayer. It could very well happen. What we're saying is that the gift of miracles no longer exists. In the first place, we see strong scriptural evidence that it died out with the apostles. Secondly, we just don't see it today. The so-called miraculous healings brought about by people who claim to have the gift of healing just don't measure up in any way to the New Testament apostolic gift of healing, which even included raising the dead, and even the dead who had been dead for several days.

We hear of people talking about Joni Eareckson Tada, this wonderful Christian lady who is a paraplegic in a wheelchair. I've heard people say, "If only she had the faith that God would heal her and get her out of that wheelchair." Well, she has prayed and prayed. Her family; her church; and, people all over prayed and prayed. God said, "I'm going to use you in that wheelchair." He has used her ministry tremendously and magnificently.

So we're saying that the gift of healing died out with the apostles. We're saying that, although God may choose, in answer to prayer, or according to the needs of His children, to perform a miracle, this is very uncommon and very rare. Most of us will never witness a true miracle.

Let me further say there are two kinds of miracles. We use the term "miracle" in two different ways. One is the technical manner in which a miracle is a sovereign act of God when He comes out of the box. He does something such that there is no way it can be explained in any other way except a sovereign act of God in which He directly intervenes: the Red Sea parts; a dead person is raised; or, someone who has been born blind is healed instantly. This is a true, class A, bonafide miracle.

**Providential Miracles**

Now what I like to call a class B miracle is a providential miracle – something that never would have happened if God hadn't caused it to happen, but you can't prove it. There are all kinds of other ways that it could be explained. But we know, because we know something about the nature of God. I witness these all the time, and so do you. It reminds you that God is behind the scenes and He's working. You've been struggling with something, and you've been praying about it, then all of a sudden you have a flash of insight, and you understand exactly what the answer is. I don't know how this comes. Sometimes it just seems to come out of the blue. Sometimes it comes through godly counsel. Sometimes it comes through open doors and circumstances. This is a providential miracle. This is the work of God. I have this happen frequently. I'll bring something up to someone: "You know, I've been thinking about you. I think you would be good at such-and-such a ministry." This person looks at me and says, "You know, I've been thinking about that, too." This in God's providence. You have a need. You have a closed door. You've been praying about it for a long time. Then you just happen to be at the right place at the right time, and you find that the door is open, and you've gone through it before you even realize it. This is a work of God. This is a providential miracle. Sometimes it happens in answer to prayer, and it usually does. Other times, in God's gracious love, He sees what we're going to need, and gives it to us before we even ask Him.

In all honesty, I want to tell you that sometimes I struggle. Sometimes I feel like I really need to do something. There is a problem in the ministry. There's something. There's a need. And I really need to do something. At other times, I think, "What I need to do is just to relax, and give God room to handle it." I just need to remember that God is in control and wait for Him. I have problems with both of these. First of all, when I feel like I need to do something, I've been around long enough and I've had enough experience to know the old saying, "Let's do something, even if it's wrong," and you start to do something, it usually will be wrong. I know that if I start out on something, unless the indication is really there that God is opening the door and leading me in that direction, at best, I'm just going to be wasting time. At worst, I can bring a lot of additional problems on myself and other people.

On the other hand, if I just relax and wait for God to act, I've got some problems too, because many times God acts through us. I find that when I just remind myself that God is in control, and I just need to wait for Him, sometimes I get dangerously close to presumption: "Well, this is God's ministry. He'll take care of it." Well, that's true, but we need to remember that Jeremiah warned the people of Judea: "You people don't believe me when I say that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is going to come down and conquer this city; break the walls down; and, destroy the temple." The people would just laugh and shake their heads: "This is God's temple. This is a special place to God. This is the apple of God's eye. God would not let anything happen to this temple." And they were wrong. They were presuming upon the grace of God. So sometimes, in having a mastery of the details of life and a relaxed mental attitude, we need to be careful that we're not using this as a cover for laziness and presumption.

So what do we do? We have one concept here where we've got to do something, and another concept here where we better not do anything, and we better just wait for the Lord. I think both of these are valid. What is required is balance between the two. We need a mental attitude of faith rest. We need to have the confidence that God, because of who and what He is, will do what is right. But we need to combine that with our willingness to play our part in what God wants to do, because He usually works through people.

I think we need to come to God, and we need to present our needs to him – and, yes, our wants. We say, "And here I am Lord. Here's what I think I'd like to do. If this is what you want me to do, I'm willing to do it. If you've got a better plan, I'm willing to go along with your plan. Then when God answers our prayer and gives us a better plan, we don't say, "This is not what I had in mind. This is not what I wanted. So I don't think I'll go along with you." But we say, "Yes, Lord, You had a better plan, and I'm willing to go with it. This takes willingness, and I think this is what God is looking for. He's looking for us to trust Him to do what He said He would do, and that is to meet all of our needs. You wouldn't think much of an employer who sent his employees out to do a job but wouldn't provide them with the tools or expenses to do the job. God is the great master. When He assigns us a job, He's going to see to it that we have everything that we need to do it. And what He requires of us is willingness, and asking.

A few years ago, The Prayer of Jabez was on the number-one bestseller list for weeks. It was amazing how many people were reading it. Many carnal Christians and unbelievers were saying the prayer of Jabez, which they memorized from Scripture, and chanting it almost every day (reciting it), because they thought they had discovered the formula for prosperity, health, and wealth.

**Prayer**

I'm not sure that this is a good idea for you to pray Jabez' prayer since you're not Jabez. But you need to pray your prayer. We need to get serious about our prayer life with God. The concept is that you say, "God, I'm serious. I want to deepen my relationship with you. I want to go deeper in intimacy with you. I want to grow spiritually. I want to build some spiritual maturity. So I'm tired of playing around and being a spectator Christian. I want to grow spiritually, and I want to serve you. I want to redeem the time. Whatever I'm doing, I want to make it count for all eternity. Whatever I do, I want to really do it. Whether I'm mowing the lawn; cleaning a toilet; teaching class; or, whatever I'm doing, I want to do it with such excellence that people will say, "The only way he could do something so well is because he's doing it unto the Lord." When I'm somewhere, I want to be all there. I want to be redeeming the time. I want to work on two levels. I want to work in two worlds. Whatever I'm doing, I want to do it on the physical temporal plane, and I want to do it on the eternal spiritual plane. I want to be like King Midas. Everything he touched turned to gold: "I want everything I touch to turn to spiritual gold because I'm in fellowship with you. I love you and I want to serve you."

This requires asking. I'll tell you something else. It requires discernment, because I've found sometimes we pray and pray and pray, and we think we're not getting any answers, and we're being answered all over the place. We just don't have enough sense to see it. I'm not discouraged by small numbers, because I know that sometimes God does more with a small group than He does with a large group. Sometimes the problem may be that there are too many people, so God takes some from you so that He can really use you.

However, we need to be concerned that if we only minister to a small group of people, let it be because that is God's sovereign will, not because we didn't ask, and not because we were not willing to go to the trouble to serve a large group because of laziness or selfishness or whatever. But we need discernment to know if our prayers are being answered. Maybe they're not being answered in the way that we thought they would be answered, but they're being answered in a better way. We need to remember what God requires of us. He requires willingness. But do you know what? He doesn't require success.

I think one reason is that we don't even have enough sense sometimes to know when we're being successful. During some of the worst failures in our lives, when sometimes we've literally got our brains beat out by failure, we've learned some valuable spiritual lessons there. Sometimes in what we call failure have been the times we've really grown spiritually. So maybe God's trying to teach us something. Maybe we're not going to change the world. But do you know what? Maybe the people that we minister to will. It may be those tapers that God is using us to get doctrine out to. Maybe that little handful of young people in Berean Memorial Church and Berean Youth Clubs are the people who are going to change the world.

Now, I said all that to say this: I'm not too concerned about miracles in the world today. First of all, when you hear about miracles, usually they are related in some way, and we need to remember that forces of evil perform false miracles. When you hear about miracles, they're usually in a context that is tainted by error. Sometimes it's just a tiny bit. Sometimes you don't even see it at first. At other times, it's this rather blatant. But usually, what people consider miracles today take us away from the truth. They just point us in that direction where we can move away from the truth. They exalt the creature rather than the Creator. And they don't prove anything anyway. Usually the cults are started by someone who performs a miracle.

There was a man named Victor Paul Wierwille back in the 1970s who began a cult which grew into a big operation. One of his books, after the cult grew (The Way International) is titled Jesus Christ Was Not God. So you can tell where he was coming from. But he was pastor of a church, and one day God spoke to him. He was in his study. God told him that the church had been in error for the last 2,000 years, and he wanted to use him (Mr. Wierwille) to straighten things out. Reverend Wierwille said, "Ah, this can't be from God." And God said, "OK, close your eyes for a minute and I'll show you." It was a hot August day. So he closed his eyes, and when he opened his eyes, he looked out the window and he witnessed a snowstorm. He closed his eyes again and opened them, and he was back to the August day. So he thought he was like Moses and he had experienced a miracle, but it led him deeper and deeper into heresy.

What I am concerned with is providential miracles – these things that believers, who are sensitive to God and in fellowship, witness every day. I believe that we need to pray, and we need to ask. Let it never be said that we don't have anything because we ask not, or that we ask for the wrong motives, or that we don't ask in faith. Let's ask God boldly. Let's ask with trust, and with a mental attitude of expectancy, believing that God will do what He said He would do. And let's be willing to play our part. If our part is to be still and wait on God, we'll do that until He indicates otherwise. If our part is to move, then when we see the open door, we move. Let us ask, in faith (believing). Let us be willing to do what God has called us to do, and let us be faithful. God has never required us to be successful, but to be faithful. Faithful means being consistent because we believe the right thing – being consistent day in and day out. I believe that when we practice this attitude, that as believers; as families; and, as a congregation, some of our best days can be ahead of us.

Leon Adkins, 2003

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