

Essential Truths III: Working With God

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Signs and Wonders

The Bible is packed full of miraculous events. In fact, the preaching ministry of Jesus cannot be separated from miraculous signs. In **Acts 10:37-38**, Peter declared:

“You know...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.”

This simple explanation – “because God was with him” – underlies the miraculous ministry of Jesus and, as we shall see, the miraculous ministry of the Church. It is simply because *God is with us* that signs and wonders happen. This fact was also recognized by Nicodemus, who in **John 3:2** confessed:

“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Defining Signs and Wonders

The Bible often uses the phrase “signs and wonders” to describe miracles. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* defines a sign as:

“A mark by which persons or things are distinguished and made known.”¹

The *Victor Bible Background Commentary* further explains:

The Birthright
Taking the Baton
The Great Commission
The Body of Christ
The Ministry of Every Believer
Joining the Work of God
The Tree of Life
The Ministry of Reconciliation
Filled with the Spirit
Ministry to the Body
Sent into the Harvest
Speaking the Word of God
A Lifestyle Gospel
Salt and Light
Enforcing the Victory
Signs and Wonders
A New Kind of Leadership
Establishing a Daily Church
Making Disciples
The New Wine
The Goal of Ministry

“The Greek word here is *semeion*. It views a miracle as an authenticating mark, rather than looking at it as a demonstration of power.”²

The word “wonder” translates a Greek word *teras*, from which comes the English word “terror.” A wonder describes something unusual that causes the beholder to marvel.³ It is, quite simply, something that inspires awe and wonder.

A sign and a wonder are two ways of describing the same miraculous event. “Whereas a sign appeals to the understanding, a wonder appeals to the imagination.”⁴ In addition, the word “miracle” is often used as a general word to describe a sign and wonder. This English word comes from the Latin *miraculum*, which means “something that evokes wonder.”

Holman Bible Dictionary defines these three words – miracles, signs and wonders – as:

“Events which unmistakably involve an immediate and powerful action of God designed to reveal His character or purposes.”⁵

Miracles are closely tied with both the character of God and the purpose of God. For this reason, before we look at the nature of miracles themselves, we need to look the nature of God and his purpose.

A Revelation of God

Read Psalm 77:14

In order to understand miracles – what they are and why they happen – we need to understand the nature of God himself. Miracles happen because of what God is like. He is “the God who performs miracles [and who displays his] power among the peoples.”

Read Daniel 6:26-27

We live today in a world that prides itself on its scientific and rational approach to life. Because of humanistic and rationalistic philosophies, many people have not only written off miracles as being “unreasonable,” but have even written off God too. Yet the Bible reveals that miracles happen because God is a God who delights in displaying his power. Signs and wonders happen because God chooses to intervene in the natural order of his creation to change circumstances according to his will. Without signs and wonders, God becomes a distant God, watching us “from a distance,” but not personally involved in our lives. As the *Holman Bible Handbook* explains:

“There is nothing irrational about believing that God who made the world can still intrude creatively into it. Christians should recognize that it is not faith in the biblical miracles, and in God’s ability to work miracles today should he so wish, but doubt about these things, that is unreasonable.”⁶

A miracle is, in itself, a revelation of God. When someone is healed, for example,

this is not just a miraculous event; it is also a revelation of God's nature. God is not just healing a person; he is revealing himself as the Healer.

Read Deuteronomy 4:33-39

Each and every genuine miracle has at its core a fundamental revelation of God's nature. Why is it then that there has been such a debate within the Church as to whether God still performs miracles today?

The Great Debate

There has been much debate over whether God still performs signs and wonders. But this debate has more to do with a revelation of God's nature than just about the fine points of New Testament theology. Here are the key questions:

- **Did God in times past intervene with miracles?** This is the most fundamental question. Another way of wording this is: Do you believe in the miraculous?
- **Were these times somehow different from today?** In other words, were there special extenuating circumstances that moved God to intervene in the past, which now no longer apply?
- **Has God's nature changed?** All Bible-believing Christians would resoundly agree that God's nature never changes (see **Malachi 3:6**). The God who performed miracles in the days of the Exodus, in the time of Elisha and Elijah, in the ministry of Jesus and in the age of the early Church, is the same God who interacts in our lives today.
- **Has God's methodology changed?** Has God changed the way that he deals with people? Has there been a change in his *modus operandi** or "M.O."?

As you can see, Bible-believing Christians agree that the answer to question one – "Did God in times past intervene with miracles?" – is yes, and the answer to question three – "Has God's nature changed?" – is no. It is therefore only questions two and four that are at issue.

Before we directly address these two questions, however, let's take look at what the Bible reveals about the ministry of signs and wonders.

The Ministry of Jesus

Read Acts 2:22

On the day of Pentecost, Peter tells his audience that Jesus was "a man *accredited by God* to you by miracles, wonders and signs." This was just ten days after Jesus' ascension, 50 days after his resurrection, and barely a month and a half after the last miracle that Jesus performed in his public ministry on earth. Peter

* *Modus operandi* is Latin for "mode of operation" or "way of doing things."

declares that this miraculous ministry validates the identity of Jesus as Messiah. The four Gospel accounts together record 40 major miracles, selected out of countless others that went unrecorded (**John 20:30; 21:25**). As John Wimber wrote:

“Jesus’ signs and wonders were his calling card, one of the proofs that the kingdom of God had come.”⁷

Yet in **John 14:12**, Jesus made an astounding declaration:

“I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”

Jesus never intended that his ministry of signs and wonders end when he returned to his Father. In fact, Jesus states that it is *because* he is returning to his Father that his followers “will do even greater things than these.”

Jesus compares the continuing ministry of signs and wonders, performed by his follows, as “greater” than his own – greater both in quantity (the sheer number of miracles performed) and quality (the types of miracles performed). For an example of things that Peter and Paul did that the Bible never recorded Jesus doing, read **Acts 5:15-16; 19:11-12**.

The book of Acts is a chronicle of the continuation of the miraculous ministry of Jesus through the early Church (read **Acts 2:42-43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6; 15:12**). The first century Christians clearly saw their ministries as an extension of the ministry of Christ, now with the proxy authority of the name of Jesus given to them so that they could continue in his footsteps (**Acts 3:16; 4:30**).

But the important question for us today is: Did the ministry of signs and wonders stop at the end of the first century?

Do Miracles Happen Today?

There are two basic theological stances to the issue of miracles*:

- ➔ That the ministry of signs and wonders ceased at the end of the apostolic age (in the first century).
- ➔ That the ministry of signs and wonders continues today and remains part of the Church’s ongoing charter.

So which is true? Well, church history shows that, despite common opinion, signs and wonders did *not* cease at the end of the first century. Here are some examples of Christian leaders writing in the second, third and fourth centuries:

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165): “For numberless demoniacs throughout the whole world, and in your city, many of our Christian men exorcising them in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, having healed

* This, of course, does not take into account liberal theologies that disallow the existence of miracles.

and do heal, rendering the helpless and driving the possessing devils out of the men, though they could not be cured by all the other exorcists, and those who used incantations and drugs.”⁸

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165): “For the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time...I have already said, and do again say, that it has been prophesied that this would be done by Him after His ascension to heaven. It is accordingly said, ‘He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, He gave gifts unto the sons of men.’ And again, in another prophecy it is said ‘And it shall come to pass after, I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh, and on My servants, and on My handmaids, and they shall prophesy’...Now it is possible to see amongst us women and men who possess gifts of the Spirit of God...”⁹

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (140-203): “For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years. And what shall I more say? It is not possible to name the number of the gifts which the Church, [scattered] throughout the whole world, has received from God, in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

Tertulian (c. 160-220): “...All this might be officially brought under your notice, and by the very advocates, who are themselves also under obligations to us, although in court they give their voice as it suits them. The clerk of one of them who was liable to be thrown upon the ground by an evil spirit, was set free from his affliction; as was also the relative of another, and the little boy of a third. How many men of rank (to say nothing of common people) have been delivered from devils, and healed of diseases!”¹¹

Novatian (210-280): “This is [the Holy Spirit] who places prophets in the Church, instructs teachers, directs tongues, gives powers and healings, does wonderful works, offers discrimination of spirits, affords powers of government, suggests counsels, and orders and arranges whatever other gifts there are of *charismata* [the gifts of the Spirit]; and thus make the Lord’s Church everywhere, and in all, perfected and completed.”¹²

Ambrose (c. 339-397): “...Behold, the Father established the teachers; Christ also established them in the churches; and just as the Father gives the grace of healings, so the Son also gives it; just as the Father gives the gift of tongues, so the Son also has bestowed it.”¹³

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who lived in the latter 4th and early 5th centuries, also relates of contemporary miracles because “[i]t is sometimes objected that miracles, which Christians claimed to have occurred [in times past], no longer happen.”¹⁴ The miracles he details include:

- A blind man whose sight was restored
- The Bishop Innocent in Carthage healed of a rectal fistula
- Innocentia in Carthage healed of breast cancer
- A doctor in Carthage healed of gout
- A blind woman healed in Hippo
- The son of Augustine's friend, who was raised from the dead

"It is a simple fact," writes Augustine, "that there is no lack of miracles even in our day. And the God who works the miracles we read of in the scriptures uses any means and manner he chooses."

The theory that miracles died out with the last of the original apostles simply is not validated by church history. Rather than dying out at the end of the first century, they have continued down through the ages. Even today, around the world, miracles are taking place as people preach the Gospel.

Proclamation of the Gospel

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

As we saw in **Module 102**, the Gospel is the power of God (**Romans 1:16**). Not only is it the power of God to save a person from the future consequences of the Fall (eternal judgment), but it is also the power of God to reverse the immediate effects of the Fall (sin, sickness, disability and death). The Gospel is the power of God to break every effect of Satan's power over a person's life.

Paul was constantly conscious that the proclamation of the Gospel required a reliance on the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the release of God's power to transform people's lives. For this reason, his preaching often went hand in hand with the miraculous. In **Romans 15:19**, Paul declared:

"I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – *by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit*. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, *I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ*."

Paul divides his ministry of the Gospel into two aspects:

- **What I have said** – "I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."
- **What I have done** – "by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit."

In the forward thrust of Gospel proclamation, the Bible describes three classes of miraculous ministry:

- **The ministry of the apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12)** – particularly characterized by a ministry of signs and wonders.
- **The gift of the miracle worker (2 Corinthians 12:10,27-31)** – spe-

cially endowed by the Holy Spirit with a gift of miracles and gifts of healing. This is a non-apostolic ministry that consistently exhibits the ministry of signs and wonders.

- **The faith of the ordinary believer (John 14:12)** – Jesus’ promise extends to “*everyone* who believes.” This does not mean that signs and wonders constantly mark this believer’s ministry, but rather that the Lord works according to that believer’s faith.

The Purpose of Miracles

Miracles may be an integral part of the Gospel proclamation, but we need to understand the purpose of miracles so that we can see them in their proper biblical perspective.

There are a number of points that we need to keep in mind before we begin moving in a balanced ministry of signs and wonders.

Miracles point to the Lord

Miracles are described as signs. A sign on the road is just a pointer. It tells us which direction to look. In the same way, miracles are a sign that should point to the Lord and to the Gospel. We must never accept a miracle simply because it is a miracle. Even Satan can perform counterfeit miracles to lead people away from a focus on Jesus (**2 Thessalonians 2:9**).

Miracles are not the focus

Read Mark 7:35-37

Read Luke 8:56

Jesus often told the people he healed not to tell anyone about it. Miracles are not to be the focus of our lives. We should not broadcast the news of miracles in order to get more people to come to our church or to make a big name for ourselves. You’ll find that the news will spread by itself. The focus should always remain on the Gospel.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-24

It’s not that the Gospel is devoid of miraculous signs or of wisdom. Both are expressed powerfully in the Gospel. It’s just that the Gospel is not centered on either miraculous signs nor on human wisdom. It is centered on “Christ crucified” – God’s expression of power and of wisdom.

Miracles are not the only way God works

Read James 1:2-3

The Fruit of Miracles

Miracles are designed by God to produce three things:

- **Faith (John 10:37-38; 14:11; 20:30-31)**
- **Awe (Exodus 14:31; Luke 5:25-26; Acts 5:11-14)**
- **Praise (Psalm 106:9-12; Acts 3:6-10; 4:21-22)**

Once a Christian has had a taste of the miraculous, there is a danger that miracles will be seen as an escape route from problems. While it is true that God often intervenes miraculously in our lives, there are also occasions when he chooses not to do so. Sometimes, when we are believing God for a miracle, we do not receive one straight away. This is not necessarily because of a lack of faith. The Bible calls this experience a “trial of your faith” (**1 Peter 1:6-7**).

Even Abraham waited 25 years before receiving the promised son. We need to understand that the work of God is much greater than just the miracle we are believing for. Faith itself produces a work in our lives that lasts for eternity.

Miracles do not necessarily convince

Read John 12:37

One of the most remarkable things we note from the Gospel accounts is that, despite the fact that many thousands received healing and saw miracles during the ministry of Jesus, only 120 were in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost!

Read Matthew 11:20-24

If a person has hardened his heart against the Gospel, no miracle will convince him. Miracles only point to the Lord, so that a person may respond in faith to the message of the Gospel.

Read John 10:25,38

Read John 15:24

Miracles cannot be the sole foundation of your experience

As wonderful as miracles are, God never intended them to be the sole foundation of your experience in Christ. As the *Victor Bible Background Commentary* explains it:

“What’s wrong with a faith that is rooted in miracles? Simply that a fascination with the miraculous is no substitute for a settled confidence in the Person of Jesus, or for obedience to His Word.”¹⁵

We must be careful that we don’t become miracle-junkies. All too often, modern Christians express a faddish Christianity, a chasing after the next-best-thing to hit the scene. While God does bless our lives in many ways, we cannot survive on a miracle-rich diet. We need to sink our teeth into God’s Word and be nourished by his personal presence. The blessing of God – expressed in the miraculous – is an added grace that peppers our daily diet of obedience and faithfulness.

Miracles are not just for believers

Much of the emphasis of miracles in the Church today is within a church’s four walls. While God does desire to heal his children, and while it is definitely good to practise the gifts of the Spirit within the Body of Christ, the main focus of the ministry of signs and wonders has never been the Church. It is the world that needs to experience the miraculous touch of God’s hand.

How Miracles Happen

Read Matthew 13:54-58

This passage records a visit Jesus made to his hometown, Nazareth. And at the end of this account, we find the remarkable words: “And *he did not do many miracles there* because of their lack of faith.”

This is Jesus we’re talking about! Even the Son of God apparently ministered within certain constraints and these are the same constraints that we move in today. So let’s take a quick look at the dynamic of the boundaries within which a ministry of signs and wonders operates.

Three things are needed in order to see miracles happen as part of your ministry:

Faith

Read Matthew 17:19-20

Faith appears constantly as the key ingredient in the ministry of the miraculous. Faith is required on the part of the minister (**John 14:12**) and faith is required on the part of the one receiving ministry (**Matthew 9:28-30; Mark 9:21-24**) – although God will sometimes override this, sending a miracle to one whose faith is shaky* (**Mark 9:23-24**).

It’s important to remember that we are not talking here about faith as a positive mental attitude. Nor are we even talking about faith that involves a constant quoting of scriptural promises. We are talking about a pure and simple faith in God – a total trust in God’s character and power.

Read Mark 6:1-6

In this account, Mark records how Jesus “could not do any miracles [in Nazareth], except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. *And he was amazed at their lack of faith.*” Jesus was constantly looking for the heart that responded to God in faith, and Paul also looked for the same thing.

Read Acts 14:9

Here Paul demonstrates one of the most important principles of the miraculous ministry – the identifying of faith in the heart of someone who is listening to the Gospel. Notice that Paul is in the process of preaching the Gospel when he notices faith in one of his hearers. Paul acts on this transaction of faith by commanding the person to receive healing.

Obedience

But faith is only part of the picture. There is also a need for your ear to be tuned to the voice of God, so that you can obey the leading of the Lord. It is the “seeing what the Father is doing” principle (**John 5:19**) and the “judging according to what you hear from the Father” principle (**John 5:30**) that strongly undergirds the ministry of miracles.

Boldness

Read Acts 4:29-30

Boldness is faith and obedience in action, anointed by the Holy Spirit. Another term the Bible uses for these three elements – faith, obedience and boldness blended together – is “being filled with the Spirit” (see **Acts 6:8**).

Confirming the Word

Read Hebrews 2:3-4

Miracles are the supporting testimony by God himself that the message of the Gospel is true. They are the seal of God’s accreditation on the ministry of his Church.

Miracles were never meant by God to stand on their own. They are complementary to the ministry of God’s Word. It is the Word and the Spirit – the preaching of the Gospel and the ministry of the miraculous *together* – that has the maximum impact on those who hear.

We see this in **Mark 16:15-18**, where Jesus commanded his disciples:

“...Go into all the world and *preach the good news* to all creation...*And these signs will accompany those who believe*: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”

The response of the disciples to this command is found in **Mark 16:20**:

“Then the disciples went out and *preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*”

¹ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

² *Victor Bible Background Commentary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

³ *Holman Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

⁴ *Holman Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

⁵ *Holman Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

⁶ *Concise Theology*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

⁷ John Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), p.97.

⁸ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* (Coxe 6:190).

⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (Coxe 1:240,243).

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*.

¹¹ Tertullian, *To Scapula* (Coxe 3:107).

¹² Novatian, *Treatise Concerning the Trinity* (Coxe 5:641).

¹³ Ambrose, *The Holy Spirit, Fathers of the Church* (Deferrari 44:150).

¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book 22, Chapter 28.

¹⁵ *Victor Bible Background Commentary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

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