

It's Supper Time. Where's Martha? - Serving Gifts

by Denis Lyle

The sermon argues that miracles were for a unique period and purpose, and they have no place in the ongoing life of the church.

Scripture: John 14:12, Acts 2:22, Acts 5:16, Romans 1:8, 1 Corinthians 12:1, 2 Corinthians 5:7, 2 Corinthians 12:7, 2 Timothy 4:20, Hebrews 13:8, Revelation 22:18

Topics: "Miracles Today", "Sign Gifts"

Description

Denis Lyle delves into the topic of whether God performs miracles today, exploring the concept of sign gifts and the historical context of miracles in the Bible. He emphasizes that while God is capable of miracles, the purpose of miracles in the Bible was to authenticate messengers of God and confirm His Word, particularly during specific periods like the days of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Christ and the apostles. Lyle addresses the misconception that miracles should be a normal experience for believers today, highlighting the unique nature of the apostolic age and the specific purpose miracles served in confirming God's messengers and His Word.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

14. DOES GOD DO MIRACLES TODAY

... SIGN GIFTS

Hans Christian Andersen is favourite author of many. His fairy tales, such as "The Princess and the Pea", "The Emperor's New Clothes", and "The Little Mermaid", have entertained children for generations. One story, though seems to be more popular than any of the others... "The Ugly Duckling". In this appealing story, a young duckling finds that he looks different from the beautiful swans in his neighbourhood. He is very sad. He feels rejected by the other, prettier ducklings. Then a miracle occurs. He realises that he has become one of the beautiful swans he has admired for so long. Young people enjoy this story because it illustrates some of the difficulties encountered in adolescence, before the "swan, " transformation into young adulthood takes place.

Some say another "ugly duckling miracle", happened in December 1996 in Florida. A customer of a Finance Corporation noticed an image on the window of the office building which was owned by none other than Ugly Duckling Car Sales. The image resembled the Virgin Mary. News of this "sighting", spread quickly. During the holidays, nearly sixty thousand people produced a traffic jam trying to view what appeared to be a miracle. A Clearwater, Florida policeman, Sergeant Pat Anderson, said, "People come in, pray, and then leave". Many people brought flowers to place below the window. Others were sure that the image was a miracle sign from God. Digna Feldman brought her twenty month old grandson to see the image". This is a miracle", she said, " I pray for her to protect him". Tammy Parke another visitor, said, " She's beautiful, its just unbelievable". Tammy brought her daughter to see the window, hoping for a miracle cure for her disability.

Later the image was vandalised. Someone threw an unknown liquid on the shape, marring it. After two days of heavy thunderstorms, the blemishes were no longer visible. Pauline McClean said, "We heard she was healing herself. It looks like it". Now a number of explanations have been given for the image. Some say it was caused by a bronze reflective agent applied to the outside of the glass before it was cut into panels. This agent evidently changes as it ages, affected by heat, moisture, and sunlight. Others explained the image as stains left from the sprinkler system. Some accept the explanations. Others continue to insist it is a miracle.

A religion professor at the University of Kansas said this, " They want some reassurance that, in fact God is in charge of things."

It seems all religions claim miracles as part of their belief systems. According to a newspaper article, the words Allah and Mohammed appeared miraculously on a sliced potato, reported Momina Ahmed of Ganhati, India.

As she was fixing lunch, she found the word inside a potato. She and her husband took the potato to the local mosque, where the man confirmed the " potato miracle."

Since then, more than ten thousand pilgrims have flocked to Momina's home to see the miracle. My, society today is obsessed with the supernatural, to the point that people are willing to interpret almost any odd phenomenon as a supernatural wonder. More and more we hear about bizarre and unusual events that are popularly misinterpreted as miracles. But what is a miracle Is it a miracle when we pray for God to meet a financial need and the postman brings a check on precisely the day the money is needed Is it a miracle when a parking space opens up near the shopping centre entrance when you need one Is it a miracle when a mother senses something wrong in an adjoining room, and investigates just in time to stop her toddler from poking a paper clip into the electric socket Is it a miracle when something prompts a young woman to think of a friend she hasn't seem for a long time, and she phones to discover that she had called at just the moment her friend needed encouragement

Are those events miracles We often call them such, but they are more properly termed "acts of providence". They reveal God's working in our daily lives, and often come as answers to prayer, but they are not the kind of supernatural signs and wonders Scripture classifies as miracles (Acts 2:22) So what is a

miracle A miracle is a supernatural intrusion into the natural law that can have no explanation other than that God is acting. Now all around us today there are claims being made that the miracles of the New Testament are being restored to the modern church. This may be a response to the death and defeat of so

many churches. Miracle crusades are advertised across the land. Others declare confidently, "A miracle a day keeps the devil away". Now we know that signs, wonders, and miracles happened in Bible times, but is what we are seeing today the same thing as we read about in God's Word

Now please, don't go out and say, I don't believe God does miracles. God can do, and does whatever He wants to do. We are not attempting to put any limitations on God. I believe God can heal people apart from natural or medical remedies. I believe all things are possible with God. I believe His power has not diminished in the least since the days of the apostolic church. But I do not believe that God uses men and women as human agents to work miracles in the same way he used Moses, Elijah, or Christ! I do not believe that the miracles, signs, wonders, being claimed to day in the Charismatic Movement have anything in common with apostolic miracles. Now we have noticed in our studies that the New Testament mentions different categories of gifts. There are SPEAKING GIFTS: there are SERVING GIFTS: and there are SIGN GIFTS! Paul mentions four temporary sign gifts in (1 Cor Ch 12) Miracles, healings, languages and the interpretation of languages!

We are thinking specifically about "the working of miracles", Does God do miracles today For our understanding I have divided the subject into 4 parts.

(1) THE PERIOD LINKED WITH MIRACLES

The Scriptures show three great bursts of miracles in history. The first burst took place in:

(a) THE DAYS OF MOSES AND JOSHUA:

We think of the plagues in Egypt, the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan River. In the case of Moses, the miracles performed, witnessed to his office as prophet and leader, causing the people to accept his messages as from God. Do you recall that when God called Moses he began to make excuses

" Behold they will not believe me, nor hearken to my voice, for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee". (Exod 4:1) Do you remember God's response "And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand And he said, A rod. And He said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast on the ground and it became a serpent... that they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers... hath appeared unto thee." God doing wonders to authenticate Moses. Now this period lasted about 100 years ! God gave the second burst of miracles in:

(b) THE DAYS OF ELIJAH AND ELISHA:

This was a time of apostasy and declension, and there was need for unusual witness to the power of God to call a people back to Himself! This period lasted about 100 until 150 years. The final burst of miracles came in:

(c) THE DAYS OF CHRIST & THE APOSTLES:

This was the period when the New Testament was given and it lasted approximately 70 years! So when has God used miracles In these three relatively brief periods of Bible history. In the days of Moses and Joshua, during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, and in the time of Christ and the apostles. None of these periods lasted much more than an hundred years. Each of these periods saw a proliferation of miracles unheard of in other eras. And the miracles that happened involved men who were extraordinary

messengers from God ... Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Christ and the apostles! My ... apart from those three periods the only other supernatural events recorded in Scripture were isolated. In the days of Isaiah, the Lord supernaturally defeated Sennacherib's army (2 Kings 19:35), then healed Hezekiah, and turned the sun's shadows back.

(20:1) In the days of Daniel, God preserved those three Hebrew children in the furnace. (Dan 3:20)

But for the most part, supernatural events like that did not characterise God's dealings with His people. The Bible does not support the expectation of some that miracles should be a normal experience for God's children. My, not all ages are miracle ages! Just three periods! Why Well, these three periods of miracles were times when God gave His written revelation... Scripture in substantial quantities. And those doing the miracles were the same ones inspired by God to write the Bible. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Elijah and Elisha introduced the prophetic age. The apostles wrote nearly all of the New Testament.

Now I am jumping ahead here, but do you see it was when God was revealing His Written Word, or Christ, His Living Word that He used miracles as a corroborating and confirming sign. (1)

(2) THE PEOPLE INVOLVED WITH MIRACLES

The age of Christ and the apostles was unique. Nothing in all Biblical history even came close to it. Disease, was in effect banished from Palestine. Demons were overwhelmed daily and the dead were raised. The flurry and scope of this miracle era pushes it far beyond the first two periods. There had never been a time like it and there is no reason to assume there will be again.

A study of the life of the Lord Jesus in the four Gospels indicates that Christ performed miracles. Think of:

(a) THE SAVIOUR:

1. Consider HIS PRIVATE YEARS:

The Lord Jesus lived thirty three years and yet for thirty of those years He did not do one single miracle. Christ performed miracles and healed the sick only for the three years of His ministry. Contrary to certain myths and legends that have cropped up through the centuries, Scripture indicates that the Lord Jesus lived a quiet, normal life as a child and as a young man exercising absolutely no supernatural powers until the wedding at Cana. Its John who tells us that His miracles began when His public ministry began. (Jn 2:11) So Christ Himself only did miracles for 3 of His 33 years, or 9 percent of His life. 1.

2. Consider HIS PUBLIC YEARS:

Luke tells us that at His Baptism which inaugurated His public ministry that "Jesus Himself began to be about thirty years of age". (Lk 3:23) Now the New Testament records approximately thirty five miracles performed by the Saviour.

* Christ performed miracles in the realm of NATURE!

At times a storm would strike the Sea of Galilee. Christ would speak a word and the storm would cease.

(Mk 4:39) On another occasion, He took a few loaves and some fish, broke them, blessed them, multiplied them and fed thousands of people. (Lk 9:13)

Matt 15:34) The Lord Jesus walked on the water to go on the disciples. (Matt 14:25) All those miracles were related to NATURE and were done only by Him. No disciple is ever reported to have done a miracle of nature.

* Christ performed miracles in the realm of HUMANITY!

He made the blind to see (Mk 10:49) the lame to walk:

(Jn 5:9) The Lord Jesus on at least three occasions even raised the dead. He brought a twelve year old girl back to life. (Mk 5:35) He raised the son of the widow of Nain from the dead. (Lk 7:11) He also raised his friend Lazarus from the dead.

My, Lazarus had been dead for four days but the Mighty Saviour called him forth from the dead. (Jn 11:43) Not only had Christ the ability to do miracles but so did:

(b) THE APOSTLES:

What miracles did they do The answer is in the word for miracle (dunamis) which means "power". Now remember this, the word that is translated "miracle, "in

(1 Cor ch 12) is the exact same word translated

" power", throughout the gospels. Now this word is frequently connected with the casting out of demons.

Have a look at (Lk 4:36 6:18 9:42) My, was it not precisely this power that the Lord gave to the twelve apostles "Then He called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases". (Lk 9:1 10:17) This ability belonged to Christ, the apostles, and the few that were touched by their lives. Do you remember what happened when Philip went down to Samaria "For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice came out of many that were possessed with them". (Acts 8:7 6:8 13:6 19:14) My, the apostles had the ability to deal with the kingdom of Satan, and it confirmed that they were of God.

America's supposed number one exorcist says that even he has problems, and some of the demons won't leave. Then he does not have the gift! Do you think that if Christ cast them out they would not leave Of course they would ! You say, "If that gift does not exist today, how do you get rid of demons The Bible says to receive Christ (Jn 1:12) How does a Christian eliminate the external influence of demonic power on his life The Bible says, " Resist the devil and he will flee from you". (James 4:7) The Bible says, "Put on the whole armour of God". (Eph 6:11) Can you show me any reference in any NT Epistle where believers are exhorted to cast demons from other Christians You say, "Well why, did Christ and the apostles do miracles" Well, that brings us to:

(3) THE PURPOSE SERVED THROUGH MIRACLES

Miracles were for the basic purpose of authenticating a messenger of God. The three words used of miracles show this to be true. Miracles are called " mighty deeds or works", which emphasises the power behind the act. They are called "wonders", which emphasises the reaction of those who observed. They are also called

" signs", which emphasises the purpose of showing the worker to be a messenger of God. Now its very interesting to note that the three periods of miracles parallel the giving of most of the Bible. Do you see what God was saying, "These are My spokesmen. Hear ye them". So the miracles served an important

purpose:

(a) In the Days of the HISTORIC EXODUS:

The miracles performed by Moses confirmed first to Pharaoh, and then to the Israelites, that Moses spoke for God. These miracles were affirmation to all that God was speaking. They served an important purpose:

(b) In the DAYS of the PROPHETIC OFFICE:

Do you recall that in (1 Kings Ch 17) Elijah raised the widow of Zarephaths dead son He brought the boy down from the upstairs room delivered him to his mother and said, "See, thy son liveth". What was the widows reply "Now by this I know that thou art a man of God and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth". (17:24) You see, this miracle authenticated the messenger of God. It was just the same:

(c) In the Days of the APOSTOLIC CHURCH:

1. CHRIST was a Miracle-Worker: WHY

Look at (John 2:11) Why did Jesus do miracles To manifest His glory. What is His glory The composite of all His attributes as Deity. Why did He do miracles

The miracle was not to improve the party, or to show off great power to the curious. But to reveal Himself as God. To establish His credentials as Messiah! Near the end of his gospel John says, "Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples which are not written in this book: But these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through His name".

(Jn 20:30-31) Why did Christ perform miracles To prove that God was being revealed in Him! Do you know what Peter said on the day of Pentecost " Ye men of Israel hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by Him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know". (Acts 2:22) God wants you to know who Christ is, so He approved of Him, confirmed Him by miracles, wonders and signs!

2. The APOSTLES were Miracle-Workers: WHY

Well, since there was no written Word to corroborate their witness, God gave them miraculous abilities. And God gave them these abilities because there was no other way for God to prove to people that these men were the only ones speaking the truth, among the many people speaking in that part of the world. So why did the apostles perform miracles What was their

purpose Well, Paul says, "Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds". (2 Cor 12:12)

What were the signs of an apostle The ability to do signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds". You say,

" What were those miracle powers" They were the signs of an especially sent one... the twelve and a few of the other New Testament apostles.

Do you recall that phrase that is used in (Heb 2:3) Have a look at it. Who was it that heard the Lord The apostles! Now (2:4) is the key! In other words they had special gifts of the Spirit... special miracle powers

to confirm the Word. If someone stood up and said, "I preach the Gospel of Christ", and another said, "Well, how do I know its true " Then wonders and signs appeared that have no other explanation, and the hearer realised that this was of God. Today, if someone is preaching, we don't need him to do a miracle, we just compare him with the Bible... the confirming Word.

But in those days there was no revealed written Word, so miracles were the attestation. If we say that miracles continue to occur today, and that their only purpose is to confirm God's revelation, His Word, then God is still revealing His Word. If God is still revealing His Word, your Bible is incomplete and (Rev 22:18) is a lie, "If any man shall add unto these things God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book."

So miracles were for a unique period, they were for a limited people, they were for a specific purpose, the confirmation of the Word. My, now that the reality is here, we don't need the sign anymore. It is the same as the difference between a picture and a person. For example, maybe your son or daughter has gone to college, or they have moved out of your home. You, have his picture as a reminder of him. But when your son comes home, you don't stand around looking at his picture, you enjoy your son. My, we don't need to look at the signs anymore we have the Bible right here.

Richard Baxter says, "Since the primary purpose for which were miracles were performed in Biblical times is no longer operative, it is reasonable to believe that miracles performed through the agency of man, as in Bible times, no longer are to be seen on earth today."

Now remember we are not saying that God can't do miracles. We are saying that God did some miracles at certain periods for a specific purpose, namely to confirm His Word... these were sign gifts, and they have no place in the ongoing life of the church. (1) (2) (3)

(4) THE PROBLEM RAISED BY MIRACLES

Actually I have listed three problems that are raised by our study.

(a) Has the PURSUIT of Miracles Increased

There is no doubt that great and sometimes irresistible pressure is being placed on God's people today to desire some spectacular vindication. Many look at the Bible and say, "But isn't the Bible just full of miracles Why is it that people in those days could experience and perform miracles and we cannot" Many Charismatics insist that God has a miracle for every believer. But if we believe that the Word of God is complete and closed and that revelation has ceased, then there is no reason for a continuing flow of miracles. My, have you noticed that from the Gospels there is a progressive lessening of miracles. By the time of Paul's epistles miracles are gone. People become sick in Paul's epistles and they stay sick... including Paul. You see, once the revelation and the Bible were finished, the purpose for miracles was finished. But you say, "But what about all of these miracles that people claim" Are the miracles that are being claimed today a restoration of the miracles which occurred in the New Testament

No! Nothing in Scripture indicates that the miracles of the apostolic age were meant to be continuous in subsequent ages! Interestingly enough, for years after the New Testament was established no miracles were claimed until the beginning of Roman Catholicism. All of a sudden supposed miracles started occurring.

In 415 the bones of Stephen were found. The bones were moved to Africa, and everywhere it is claimed, miracles happened. A merchant in one town stole the arm of John the Baptist, which had been preserved in a shrine. As long as he kept it in his closet, he became rich, but when somebody found it and took it away, he became a beggar. The churches of the saints Cosmas and Damien at Rome displayed a miracle-working vial of the breast milk of the virgin Mary. This became such a popular miracle worker that many churches in France had bottles of Mary's breast milk to do miracles. They even said that this was not necessarily the milk that the virgin used to nourish the child, but that she, through all the ages, had continued to nourish her children in times of deadly need. Even her statues and paintings would give milk at certain times to certain saints. Supposed apparitions of Mary have occurred all over the world at places like Lourdes.

Tell me, was God confirming Roman Catholicism by all of these things What about today when they tell us that in Indonesia God made porridge for many people at a party Oral Roberts at a Charismatic Conference in 1987 said this, "I can't tell you about all the dead people I've raised, I've had to stop a sermon, go back and raise a dead person". John Wimber lists raising the dead as one of the basic elements of the healing ministry. My, its significant that not one modern occurrence of raising the dead can be verified. What about Oral Roberts claim Well, when he was challenged to produce names and addresses of people he had raised Roberts shirked. My, counterfeit miracles continue and this poses a tremendous danger for the church, because Scripture tells us that false miracles, will be a primary tool of Satan in the end times. As Christ said, "For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch that if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect". Then Christ added,

" Behold I have told you before". Surely, in the light of our Lord's words some healthy scepticism on the part of Christians is warranted. (a)

(b) IS THE PERSON OF CHRIST CHANGED

Charismatics will usually say something like this,

" Since Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever, then He is still performing the same kind of miracles that He did in New Testament times" In other words, they apply (Heb 13:8) to miracles. But My, this verse does not describe His methods, rather it discusses His person and character. God, although He is the same God, has used various methods and modes in His dealings with mankind. God's way of working does change. The book of Hebrews is a prime example of that fact. But His character, His essence, His position as God remain the same. The final problem is this:

(c) HAS THE POWER OF GOD DIMINISHED

In (Acts 5:16) early in the apostolic age, when the church was just getting started, we read that multitudes were being healed by the apostles. Twenty-five years later Paul, the greatest of all the apostles could not be delivered from his own troublesome thorn.

(2 Cor 12:7)

Though he at one time seems to have had the ability to heal others at will (Acts 28:8) as Paul neared the end of his life he showed no evidence of such a gift. He advised Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake, a common way of treating illness in that day.

(1 Tim 5:23) Later on, at the very end of his career, Paul left a beloved brother sick at Miletus (2 Tim 4:20)

He surely would have healed him if he could. My, in the early pages of Acts, Jerusalem was filled with miracles. After the martyrdom of Stephen, however, no more miracles were recorded in that city. Something was changing. The miracles of the apostolic age were not to be the pattern for succeeding generations of Christians. We have no mandate to seek or perform miracles, but we do have a mandate, to study and obey God's Word, which is able to make us wise and mature. And we do have a mandate to live by faith and not by sight. (2 Cor 5:7)

In (Jn 14:12) the Lord Jesus made this promise.

" Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me the works that I do shall he do also, and greater works than these shall he do, because I go to my Father". Did the apostles not prove these words true on the day of Pentecost when three thousand were saved The Lord Jesus rarely went beyond the borders of Palestine, but they went everywhere preaching the gospel. (Rom 1:8)

My, the "greater works", were not physical but spiritual in nature. What is a greater work than raising the dead Its bringing eternal life to someone who is dead in trespasses and sins.

Some tell us that if we concede that the apostolic miracles are past, we hold a deficient concept of God.

Jerry Homer, associate professor of Biblical literature at Oral Roberts University said, "Who in the world would want a God who has lost all of His zip Could God do one thing in one century, but not in another century Has God lost all of His power "Well, has God lost His power Has He done nothing significant in the last two thousand years Thats hardly the case. All around us we see evidence of Gods marvellous work, changing the lives of millions around the world who trust Christ, in daily answers to prayer, in the resilience of His church which has survived ruthless persecution through the centuries and continues to do so today. But God has not placed spokesmen with miracle-working power in the church today!

Paul gives us a promise for our age. He says our Lord

" is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us."

What God does in and through us today is not what we He did in the apostolic age. He had a special purpose for the apostles and their miracles, and that purpose was served. He also has a special purpose for us, and it will be marvellous, because He is God and what He does is always marvellous.

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