

# The Miracles of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

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*The primary purpose of Jesus' miracles was to reveal His Divine mission, not to convince those who were not yet His disciples.*

**Scripture:** John 2:11, John 7:31, John 7:37, John 10:41, John 14:11, John 20:30, Acts 1:3

**Topics:** "Divine Miracles", "Christology"

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## Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the purpose and significance of miracles in the Gospels, emphasizing that they were not primarily for evidential purposes but rather as signs of Christ's divine mission. Miracles were meant to awaken faith in those who were already predisposed to believe, rather than to compel belief in skeptics. The focus shifts from miracles as proofs to the miraculous Person of Christ, with His life and works being congruous with His supernatural nature. The Gospels serve to interpret the supernatural person of Jesus through the lens of history, highlighting His extraordinary conception and divine intervention on behalf of humanity.

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## Transcript

For our present purpose of answering the question "What think ye of Christ?" it is necessary and important to observe the place given to our Lord's miracles in the Gospels. A careful study of them, just as they appear, reveals the undoubted fact that they were not wrought by our Lord primarily for evidential purposes, for convincing those who were not as yet His disciples. At the outset of His ministry we are significantly told of the limited result of His first miracle. "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory; and His disciples believed on him" (John 2:11).

"His disciples" - that was all; no one else of the company seems to have been impressed. Soon afterwards, when He exercised His authority by cleansing the Temple of the money changers, He was asked to justify His action by means of a miracle. "What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?" Instead of working a miracle, He referred them to the then far-off event of His resurrection. "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." In the same way throughout His ministry He frequently enjoined silence on those on whom He had bestowed physical blessing, a silence which would have been unnecessary, out of place, and inexplicable if the primary Idea of miracles had been to spread the knowledge of Himself over the land.

Of course it was inevitable that such works should become known and have their effect in calling attention to Him, but this was a consequence rather than the primary purpose. The same secondary place of

miracles is seen in our Lord's words to His disciples on the eve of His passion. He puts first, belief in Himself apart from miracles. "Believe me that I am in the Father" (John 14:11). And then He introduces miracles only if the disciples could not otherwise rise to faith in Him.

"Or else believe me for the very works' sake" (verse 11). In accordance with this, the summary statement of the purpose of the Fourth Gospel is significant. "Many other signs did Jesus in the presence of His disciples" (John 20:30). Another indication in the same direction are the words used to describe these wonderful works. The first in order of thought is wonder, which expresses the feelings of the witnesses in the presence of what had been done. The next is power, which indicates the result of their thought as it began to play on these deeds; some "power" was evidently at work.

But the most important of all is sign, which clearly indicates the place of miracles in the Gospels. They were signs of something other and higher than themselves - they were symbolic of Christ's Divine mission. But it should be observed that a "sign" is not necessarily a proof, and it is significant that the miracles are never called by any word meaning "proof." The word "proof" (Acts 1:3) is only found in connection with our Lord's manifestation of Himself after His resurrection.

In other words, the real proof was Himself rather than His works. A sign cannot compel belief, or enemies would surely have been convinced. It only carries a meaning, or sign, or significance to those who are already impressed. So Westcott rightly says that - Miracles or signs are more properly in their highest form the substance than the proofs of revelation. ... The best idea which we can form of a miracle is that of an event or phenomenon which is fitted to suggest to us the action of a personal spiritual power. ...

Its essence lies not so much in what it is in itself as in what it is calculated to indicate. [Westcott, The Gospel of Life, p. 76.] We may observe this true place of miracles still further as we contemplate the almost utter disregard of them on the part of those in whose presence they were wrought. They created interest and stirred curiosity, but apparently they seldom led to conviction unless there had been some other predisposing cause of faith in Christ. The powerlessness of miracles to convince the gainsayer is clearly seen in the words, "When Christ cometh will he do more miracles than this man doeth?" (John 7:31).

"Though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him" (John 7:37). Those who were not prepared to receive His message without miracles were not as a rule ready to accept miracles as an attestation of His Divine commission. The phenomenon, I say, which is apprehended as a miracle suggests the idea of the action of a personal spiritual power. But in itself it can do no more than suggest the idea of his action. It is wholly unable in any intelligible sense to prove the existence of such a power, and still less to prove that the power is Infinite. [Westcott, op. cit., p. 76. ] In view of this clear indication of the place of miracles and purpose of miracles in the life of Christ, it is obvious that we cannot, and, indeed, for our purpose we have no need to emphasize them as evidence for His Person.

Any such evidence that they carried was to contemporaries only, and this necessarily diminishes in force with lapse of time. Few would now maintain that the miracles are to us proofs of the Divine mission of Jesus Christ. Their evidential force, supposing them to have been wrought, was immediate: they appealed to those who originally saw them. And the conviction aroused in the primary witnesses could not be communicated to later generations. Thus the problem presented by our Lord's miracles is for us less theological and apologetic and far more historical and literary than it used to appear to our fathers. [Bishop Chase, Cambridge Theological Essays, p. 402.

See also Illingworth, *Divine Immanence*, pp. 88-90.] For us today the Person of Christ is the great miracle, and the true line of thought is to argue from Christ to miracles rather than from miracles to Christ. We are not then justified, either by reason or by Scripture, in assigning to miracles, and still less to the record of miracles, a supreme power of proof. But none the less they fulfill externally an important function in the Divine economy They are fitted to awaken, to arouse, to arrest the faith which is latent.

They bring men who already believe in God into His presence. They place them in an attitude of reverent expectation. [Westcott, *The Gospel of Life*. p. 82.] But this is not for an instant to say that the miraculous element in the Gospels is not a fitting and even necessary part of the record of the life of Christ. On the contrary, the place of the miracles in the Gospels is exactly what we should have expected from One whose Person was what His was. Since Jesus was verily an incarnation of the Godhead, miraculous works in His life were only becoming and natural.

This does not in the least exclude the application of the severest criticism to the historical accounts of the Christian miracles. But the unbroken course of nature, in the presence of a fact so stupendous as Incarnation, had been of all things unnatural and incredible. [Young, *The Christ of History*, p. 255.] It is the most natural and obvious thing in the world that He who was what He was should do what the Gospels record of Him. And it is noteworthy that one of the words very frequently used of these miracles in the Gospels is the ordinary term, works (εργα).

They were the natural and necessary outcome of His life, the expression in act of what He Himself was. The moral elevation and religious intensity of the Gospels should count for something. The indissoluble connection between the works and the words of Jesus, between these and His character and consciousness, must receive due regard. The narratives of miracles are woven into the very texture of the evangelical record. How many of the sayings of Jesus are closely linked with works of healing?

How many of the most beautiful and attractive traits in the portrait of Jesus are drawn from His dealing with sufferers who came to Him for relief? [Garvie, *Studies in the Inner Life of Jesus*, p. 51.] That His own abundant vitality should have been somehow communicated to other persons is not surprising. That One who was so full of life and compassion should seek to help and bless the needy was surely to be expected. The miracles are harmonious with the character and consciousness of Jesus; they are not external confirmations, but internal constituents of the revelation of the Heavenly Father's love, mercy, and grace, given in Him, the beloved Son of God, and the compassionate Brother of men. [Garvie, *op. cit.*, p. 51.]

The miracles were not merely marvels; with two exceptions (which are not sufficient to set aside the general principles) they were restorative and beneficent. The motive and scope of the Lord's miracles recorded in the Gospels are ever the same. The notices of the miracles are scattered up and down over the Gospels. But when they are considered in relation to each other, we discover in them an undesigned unity. Together they cover the whole ground of our Lord's work as the Saviour, renewing each element in man's complex being and restoring peace in the physical order.

They are not presented in the Gospels as primarily designed to enhance His dignity and His power. If they had been the invention of pious fancy, yearning to illustrate by imposing stories His greatness and His glory, it is a moral impossibility that this subtle unity of purpose should have been so consistently and so unobtrusively observed. [Chase, *Cambridge Theological Essays*, p. 404.] We are therefore not now concerned with the abstract problem of the possibility of the miraculous; such a question would be entirely

unnecessary for our present purpose.

We are face to face with a supernatural Person, and the question whether He could or did do supernatural works is after all not of the first importance. The supreme question is as to the Person Himself, for "a sinless Christ is as great a miracle as a Christ who can walk on the water." [Bruce, Humiliation of Christ, p. 208, note 1.] The question of miracles has often been too widely separated from the question of the miraculous Person. Modern thought in its belief in the uniformity of nature has undoubtedly modified our conception of the supernatural, and the "supernatural is not for us the same thing as the arbitrary or unnatural." [Sanday, Expository Times, vol. xx, p. 158.]

But the demand for absolute regularity of nature would really exclude Christ Himself as supernatural, and also make His appearance in time nothing more than the outcome of natural evolutionary processes. We therefore really gain nothing by simply insisting on absolute uniformity of nature as the great modern law, unless we are prepared to go further and deny the possibility of any Divine interposition which, while being not "arbitrary or unnatural" should nevertheless be truly supernatural.

Everyone will concede to Dr. Sanday "the uniformity of the ordinary course of nature." If it were otherwise, we should have no world in which we could live at all. The question is not, Do natural causes operate uniformly? but, Are natural causes the only causes that exist or operate? For miracle, as has frequently been pointed out, is precisely the assertion of the interposition of a new cause; one, besides, which the theist must admit to be a vera causa. [Orr, The Resurrection of Jesus, p. 51.]

If, therefore, we are to allow the scientific doctrine of the uniformity and continuity of nature to bar the way, we shall inevitably come to the conclusion that miracles are impossible, and from this would follow, as it usually does follow, the conclusion that a miraculous Christ is impossible. The question is thus really decided on a priori grounds before the evidence is even looked at. But, how, then, is the modern position to be met? How are we to retain our belief in the uniformity of nature and also in the miracles?

In one way only: by predicting a true theistic view of the world. To the materialist miracle is, of course, impossible, but on the assumption that God is, and is at once transcendent and immanent, miracles are not impossible. Those who accept the evangelical narratives of miracles do not assume any breach in the continuity of nature, any disregard of the universal laws of movement. ... Negatively, we define miracles as events which nature as known in our common experience cannot explain. ...

Positively, we define miracles as events which, because of their character and purpose, we ascribe to the will of God, being ignorant whether that will acts directly or uses means of which we know nothing. ... May not that Divine will act generally according to fixed habit, and yet for special ends act in a way new and strange? In life physical forces are transcended; so vital processes in mind; the process of evolution allows at this stage or that a Divine initiative. Grant the moral significance and religious value of Jesus, is it incredible or unreasonable to hold that such a Divine initiative is connected with His Person? [Garvie, Studies in the Inner Life of Christ, p. 52.]

The Person of Christ is therefore a great miracle, and the issue cannot be evaded. He represents a definite, Divine intervention on behalf of man at a particular moment of time in the world's history, and on this great miracle of the Person of Christ we take our stand. Jesus, in a word, was Deity manifested in humanity and under the conditions of time. Now this is in itself an extraordinary conception, and it is made more extraordinary by the marvelous way in which it is embodied in a personal history.

There never was a loftier idea, or one better calculated to challenge prompt and complete contradiction, than the one expressed in our Gospels, models though they be of simplicity in narrative and language. Their common purpose is to describe the life and record the words of a person they conceive as miraculous. ... What is common to all four Evangelists, and what is in their mind essential, is the idea, not that the miraculous history proves the person to be supernatural, but that the history was miraculous because it articulated and manifested the supernatural person.

The Gospels may indeed be described as the interpretation of this person in the terms of history; and so regarded, the Jesus of Mark is as miraculous as the Jesus of John. [Fairbairn, *The Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, p. 326.] When this is clearly seen the question of the number and character of the miracles becomes quite secondary. The inquiry resolves itself simply into this: granted such a supernatural Person, were supernatural deeds congruous with His life? The character of the works attributed to Him, their beneficence, the restraint under which they were worked, the comparatively insignificant place they occupied in His ministry, and the constant stress laid by Him on spiritual kinship as primary - these are all entirely congruous with the manifestation and working of so miraculous and superhuman a Person as Jesus is seen to be.

Two things are perfectly clear to all careful readers of the Gospels. (1) The writers do recognize a distinction between natural events and miracles, between occurrences which are ordinary and extraordinary. As Westcott says - Whole structures of popular objections, for example, fall before a simple statement like that in which the Evangelist undesignedly contrasts the ministry of the Baptist with the ministry of Christ: "John indeed did no sign" (John 10:41). [Westcott, *The Gospel of Life*, p. 83.] (2) The writers considered that there was an extraordinary element in our Lord's life.

That there was conspicuously present in the Lord's life an element of activity transcending common experience is a conclusion which rests on amply sufficient evidence. [Chase, *Cambridge Theological Essays*, p. 405.] Nor must it be overlooked that this miraculous element is as clear and prominent in the earliest strata of the Gospels as it is in their present form.

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