

A preponderance of miracles

Introduction

Modern churches are fascinated by miracles and seek the ability to perform them. In recent decades a whole movement¹ was devoted to miracles as the basis of its ecclesiastical theology and evangelistic method. Even churches not directly associated with radical Charismatic streams became infatuated with the concept of miracles.

Over time it became an accepted practice to pray for the healing of complete strangers in the street as an opening salvo in evangelism. Suddenly Scripture had been reversed. Charismatics affirmed that God will heal complete sinners who have not repented and trust that this beneficence will lead them to consider Christ. However, Scripture tells us that God does not favour sinners but hates them,² he is angry with them every day,³ considers their work as sin,⁴ does not hear their prayers,⁵ does not respect their offerings,⁶ curses their house⁷ and will not do them good.

What had happened was that the focus upon healing and miracles had repudiated the Biblical doctrines of God's sovereignty, God's providence, God's goodness and God's grace, plus total depravity, election and limited atonement. This denied multiple factors of God's attributes. [But that was the satanic objective!]

The focus upon healing continues to this day and when healings do not appear they are fabricated,⁸ fraudulently claimed,⁹ or minor things (that have natural causes) are hyped up into something special.¹⁰

What all of this fails to realise is what the Bible teaches about miracles. It is actually the reverse of what is taught in the churches today.

The essence of Charismatic apologetics is that as the church obtains its promises and blessings, and its members are baptised in the Spirit, so power will flood into the church and this power will produce an age of miracles and healings.

Well, many churches claimed to have experienced this situation from 1960 onwards, claiming to have a powerful influx of the Holy Spirit's power; yet we have never seen widespread miracles and the claimed healings have been largely repudiated or hyped up.

¹ The Signs and Wonders Movement, which became the Third Wave of Charismaticism.

² Ps 5:5-6

³ Ps 7:11

⁴ Prov 21:4

⁵ Jn 9:31

⁶ Prov 15:8

⁷ Prov 3:33.

⁸ There have even been exposes of Charismatic leaders using hidden ear-pieces to have information transmitted to them so that they can give 'words of knowledge' about audience members.

⁹ Many famous Charismatic leaders have proclaimed a person to be completely healed only for them to die days later, sometimes brought on by the 'healer' (such as ceasing medication because they thought they were healed).

¹⁰ Such is the case when emotionalism, hyped up in a worship meeting, enables people to produce serotonin, adrenaline and endorphins which can have analgesic effects so that the pain of a condition is temporarily alleviated.

We never see Charismatics healing blindness on the streets or emptying the hospitals of cancer patients.

What the Lord's people need to understand is why miracles occur and when they are usually necessary. This is the purpose of this paper.

The Lord and his apostles

Charismatics take their cue from the miraculous age surrounding the ministry of the Lord Jesus and subsequently of the apostles; however, this is not a good baseline for establishing God's use of miracles.

The appearance of God's Son on earth, and his subsequent empowering of his representatives, was the most climactic and exceptional period in world history. It was surrounded by miracles of all sorts as part of the divine authentication of God's representatives.

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him*, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?

Heb 2:3-4

Here the writer affirms that this exceptional period of divine activity was centred in 'the Lord ... and those who heard him'. Grace was especially given to the disciples of Christ to work miracles to authenticate that their ministry was from God. Over time this grace was reduced as not necessary, and so miracles soon began to disappear. Tongues ceased early on and are not mentioned in the later NT books after Acts 19 and 1 Corinthians;¹¹ thus they seem to have faded away after about 60 AD. Even the church fathers confirm that miracles largely ceased by the close of the apostolic age¹² or even earlier, before 70 AD.¹³ There are a few claimed miracles up to about 300-400 AD but many of these have only mythical or anecdotal status. Miracles were certainly not a normal experience after 100.

The absolute exceptional nature of these miracles, associated with the revelation of the Messiah and the institution of the Messianic Age (the Gospel Age) means that we cannot look to this time as a church norm. We cannot go to the book of Acts and draw out permanent lessons for the modern church regarding miracle working.

The fact that God (who is sovereign over all things) did not plan for his people to experience permanent miracle working is shown in the fact that throughout church history over 2,000 years, there have not been any miracles (or perhaps only a few isolated exceptions).

Now Pentecostals and Charismatics will claim that that is because of the failings of the church. It is man's fault. The church could have worked more miracles but failed to have faith and understanding. They claim that the Pentecostals had better understanding of the Bible and thus more faith and so miracles restarted after about 1901.¹⁴

¹¹ Written 57 AD.

¹² John lived to about 90-95 AD.

¹³ The fall of Jerusalem.

¹⁴ The beginning of modern Pentecostalism with the Topeka, Kansas, revival under Parham.

Apart from anything else, this is a grave misrepresentation of church history. Some of the greatest, most sound, most godly, most glorious Christians lived long before the 20th century. Indeed we could list hundreds of names of men and women that far outshone any Pentecostal leader, many of which fell into gross sin, police prosecution and public scandals. To suggest that Pentecostals who sinned had greater faith than saints of old is a disgrace and as stupid as it is fallacious.

This Arminian Pentecostal reasoning is a denial of the power and sovereignty of God in history. Those who believe in God's sovereignty will affirm that, if he had so desired, miracles would certainly have appeared in the church throughout the last 2,000 years. They did not; therefore, the sovereign God did not want them to.

Furthermore, we can add that the supposed miracles claimed by Charismatics and Pentecostals fall far short of the biblical standard of miracles. They are not miracles at all.

So, we must take into account that the period of miracles surrounding the Lord and his disciples is not a guide to the normal activity of God. It was the ushering in of a new age, the Last Time, and is entirely exceptional. Nothing like this has happened in church history and it never will. This is not the pattern for the modern church to aspire to and church history proves that.

A better time to evaluate

We need a long period of time covering divine activity in the church where miracles did indeed occur sporadically and evaluate how these arise and why. Such a time is available to us in the history of the Old Testament, and particularly the history of Israel (i.e. after the Exodus).

This affords us a large number of varied miracles that have proven divine testimony and also long periods without any divine miracle working at all. This is the best field of evidence for us to make some conclusions about miracles and why they are given.

Conclusions

The basis of my analysis will be Appendix One ('Miracles in the OT') from my book *The Concise History of Israel in the OT*.

After the miracle of creation, from the time of the patriarchs to the exile in Babylon there are approximately 106 separate miracles.¹⁵ I will supply the table of these miracles from this book at the end of this paper.

Miracles are not the norm

The table shows very clearly that there are periods of multiple miracles (such as the time of Elisha) and long periods where there were none at all.

The first conclusion therefore, has to be that miracles are not the norm for the church but are for specific reasons.

Missing in orthodox periods

The next clear observation is that during times of relative peace, prosperity and godly behaviour, miracles tended to be entirely absent, or few and far besides.

¹⁵ Numbers will vary according to how you define a miracle and whether certain events (such as Moses' staff changing or Samson's strength) constitute one or more miracles.

Apart from Isaac's birth, there is only one miracle involving both Isaac and Jacob. In the time of Israel's prosperity under Solomon, before his sins, there were no miracles after the fire from heaven at the time of the dedication of the temple. There were few, or even no, miracles during the reign of good kings such as Asa, Jehoshaphat, Josiah and Hezekiah. There were few miracles even during David's reign.

Apart from some early miracles, mostly of judgment upon enemies, there were no miracles in Joshua's later leadership. During the time of many miracles in Israel by Elijah and Elisha, there were few, if any at all, in Judah. There were no miracles amongst the returned exiles under the revival led by Ezra.

The second conclusion is that miracles are not usual in times of orthodoxy and peace.

Common in times of apostasy and rebellion

The overwhelming conclusion from examining the number of OT miracles is that they were used by God for one reason or another, in times of apostasy and rebellion of God's people. Indeed, in some periods there are miracles of judgment on God's people while there are miracles of healing and provision for Gentiles (e.g. Naaman or the widow of Zarephath). Indeed, the Lord himself makes this very point.

But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, *in the region* of Sidon, to a woman *who was* a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. Lk 4:25-27

We can group miracles like this:

- Exodus: miracles associated with judgment on the Egyptians.
- Wilderness: miracles either to testify to God in the face of unbelief and complaining, or judgment on apostates.
- Conquest: miracles mostly associated with judgment on the Canaanites.
- Judges: miracles dealing with apostasy and rebellion, and judgment on God's enemies.
- Samuel: miracles were mostly judgment on God's enemies.
- Kings and Chronicles: mostly acts of judgment on God's enemies or apostates.
- Elijah: mostly actions of judgment on God's enemies and apostates; provision for God's people and signs of authority.
- Elisha: provision for God's people; judgment on God's enemies and apostates; signs of authority; discipline for sin and healing of a Gentile.
- The miracles in Babylon: were during a time of judgment on God's people and were warnings to Gentiles.
- The miracles involving Jonah were responses to his disobedience.

With one or two exceptions miracles occurred in periods of apostasy, were judgments on God's enemies, or were reactions to sin. There were few, if any, miracles in times of religious revival and fewer still in times of peace and security. Most miracles were warnings during times of rebellion and apostasy.

So, the lesson we learn from Israel in the OT is that miracles were mostly used by God for disciplinary purposes to either warn his people about apostasy and sin, or to act in

judgment upon sinners. There were occasionally miracles of provision for God's servants during times of great difficulty who were fighting such apostasy.

However, we must remember that these were a theocratic people and such a situation does not apply to any nation today.

The wilderness miracles

Examining the miracles during the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness is especially valuable for these reasons:

- We are expressly told that this period was a warning and example to the church now.¹⁶
- The period is chiefly focused upon the situation within the camp of Israel rather than Israel's place amongst the nations.
- It is the time of the giving of the law of God and the provision of the Tabernacle worship system. It is the beginning of the gathering together of the Lord's people.
- It occupies four Biblical books with great details given. There is more information on this period than any other.

The many miracles that appeared in the time of the wilderness wanderings were associated with apostasy and a rebellious people. Despite multiple miracles on a large scale, the vast majority of the people that saw them died in sin and rebellion, being rejected by God. Only Caleb and Joshua avoided this.

So we have a period where there were more amazing miracles than any other time in history, beginning with the parting of the Red Sea but followed by astounding things, such as: provision of water from a dead rock twice, provision of heavenly manna, fire from heaven, earthquakes from heaven and many more.

Charismatics would certainly want to live in a time of such great miracles but any sane Bible student would never want any part with that people who were virtually all destroyed for rebellion.

The depth of the rebellion and apostasy amongst God's people required, in God's plan, very powerful miracles to serve as a warning against revolt – but the people still rebelled and died despite the miracles. The miracles did these Israelites no good at all. Paul tells us to be warned by this about unbelief and warned not to lust after evil things.

This is a classic example of how God dispenses miracles. They are not a sign of God's approval on a faithful community but a sign of heavenly warning and condemnation in the main. During times of faithful testimony and peace there are no miracles.

Does the modern church want to be faithful and peaceful or does it want miracles, which are associated with divine discipline, warning and condemnation?

¹⁶ 'But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now **these things became our examples**, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. ... Now all these things happened to **them as examples, and they were written for our admonition**, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.' 1 Cor 10:5-11.

Conclusion

Modern churches focus on miracles. Modern Christians are overly infatuated with miracles, while modern false apostles seek miracles to supply authenticity and authority to their ministry (which is itself arrogant, proud and sinful).

Jesus warned about this desire saying that it was a 'wicked and adulterous generation' that sought such things.¹⁷

At a time when church leaders are emulating the Pharisees in their pursuit of authority and controlling power over people, based upon false teaching and religious rituals, leaders are also copying the Pharisees' desire for signs. They will come under the same condemnation from the Lord.

The warning of the Lord still stands, it is wicked people that seek miracles, a faithless generation that longs after signs and wonders.

As Jesus himself said,
Why does this generation seek a sign? Mk 8:12

God does not want us to pursue miracles; he commands us to pursue righteousness and humility in seeking him.

You who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD. Isa 51:1

Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, Who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. Zeph 2:3

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Matt 6:33

The modern church, while pursuing miracles and power has lost righteousness and humility. It has thus lost the Lord.

¹⁷ Matt 12:39, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign,' Matt 16:4, 'A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign.' Mk 8:12, 'He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign?"'

Appendix One

Miracles in the Old Testament

Miracle	Place	Reference
Creation in 6 days		
Patriarchal period		
The flood	Global	Gen 7-8
Confusion of tongues	Babel	Gen 11:1-9
Fire passes between Abraham's sacrifice		Gen 15:17
Destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah	Sodom & Gomorrah	Gen 19:24
Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt	Zoar	Gen 19:26
Wombs of Abimelech's household closed the reopened.	Gerar	Gen 20:17-18
Birth of Isaac		Gen 21:1-3
Hagar allowed to find water	Wilderness of Beersheba	Gen 21:19
Healing of Rebekah's womb		Gen 25:21
Healing of Rachel's womb		Gen 30:22
Exodus		
Burning bush	Horeb	Exod 3:1-3
Moses' rod changed into a snake and back again	Horeb	Exod 4:3-4
Moses' hand turned leprous, then healed	Horeb	Exod 4:6-7
Aaron's signs	Egypt	Exod 4:30
Aaron's rod changed into a snake	Egypt	Exod 7:10-12
Aaron's rod/snake swallows up magicians serpents.	Egypt	Exod 7:12
The ten plagues	Egypt	
Waters turned to blood		Exod 7:214-25
Frogs		Exod 8:1-15
Gnats		Exod 8:16-19
Flies		Exod 8:20-32
Murrain (cattle plague)		Exod 9:1-7
Boils		Exod 9:8-12
Hail		Exod 9:13-35
Locusts		Exod 10:1-20
Darkness		Exod 10:21-29
Death of firstborn		Exod 11:12-36
Parting of Red Sea	Egypt	Exod 14:21-31
Wilderness		
The pillar and the cloud	Wilderness	Exod 13:21 etc.
Water sweetened	Marah (wilderness)	Exod 15:23-25
Provision of Manna	Wilderness	Exod 16:14-35
Water from the rock at Horeb	Massah / Meribah (i.e. Rephidim)	Exod 17:5-7
Miriam struck with leprosy then cured.	Wilderness	Num 12:10-15
Aaron's rod budded	Kadesh	Num 17:1ff
Defeat of Amalek	Rephidim	Exod 17:9-13
Moses' face shines with glory	Sinai	Exod 34:29-35
Fire consumed the burnt offering	Sinai	Lev 9:24
Nadab and Abihu destroyed by fire	Sinai	Lev 10:1-2
Burning of some complaining people	Taberah	Num 11:1-3
Destruction of Dathan and Abiram and their families by divine earthquake		Num 16:27-33
Fire from the LORD consumed two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense with Korah.		Num 16:36
14,700 killed by plague		Num 16:46-50
Water from the rock	Desert of Zin / Kadesh / Meribah	Num 20:7-13
Victory over King Arad	Hormah	Num 21:1-3

Fiery snakes	The road to Atharim; from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea.	Num 21:5-9
Healing by brazen serpent	The road to Atharim; from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea.	Num 21:8-9
Moses buried by God in secret	Moab, opposite Beth Peor.	Deut 34:5-7
Balaam's ass speaks	Pethor	Num 22:21-35
Conquest		
Dividing the River Jordan	Jordan	Josh 3:14-17
Destruction of the walls of Jericho	Jericho	Josh 6:6-20
Sun stands still	Gibeon	Josh 10:12-14
Hailstorm destroys several armies	Beth Horon as far as Azekah.	Josh 10:11
Judges		
Gideon's sacrifice consumed by fire	Ophrah	Jdg 6:21
Gideon's fleece	Ophrah	Jdg 6:37-40
Victory over the Midianites	The valley by the hill of Moreh	Jdg 7
Manoah's sacrifice consumed by fire	Zorah	Jdg 13:19-20
Samson's strength	Various places	Jdg 14:6 etc.
Water from the rock for Samson	En-hakkore	Jdg 15:19
1-2 Samuel		
Idol of Dagon falls down before the Ark, falls again and is broken.	Ashdod	1 Sam 4:1-5
Philistines struck with tumours	Ashdod	1 Sam 4:6
Ark taken by two milk cows away from calves	Philistia	1 Sam 6:2-12
50,070 men of Beth Shemesh, struck because they had looked into the ark.	Beth Shemesh	1 Sam 6:19
Thunder from God confuses Philistines during battle so that they were overcome.	Mizpah (Ebenezer)	1 Sam 7:10
Thunder and rain upon Samuel's prayer.	Gilgal	1 Sam 12:18
The sound in the mulberry trees.	Rephaim	2 Sam 5:23-25
Uzzah struck dead.	Perez-uzzah	2 Sam 6:7
1-2 Kings / 2 Chron		
Jeroboam's hand withered	Bethel	1 Kg 13:4
Altar split apart	Bethel	1 Kg 13:5
Syrians made to panic	Samaria	2 Kg 7:6-7
Lions sent into Samaria in judgment	Samaria	2 Kg 17:25
Sennacherib's army (185,000) destroyed	Jerusalem	2 Kg 19:35
Holding back the sun by Isaiah's prayer	Jerusalem	2 Kg 20:9-11
Fire consumes Solomon's sacrifice	Jerusalem	2 Chron 7:1
Uzziah struck with leprosy	Jerusalem	2 Chron 26:16-21
Hezekiah cured and life prolonged	Jerusalem	Isa 38:1-5
Elijah		
Widow of Zarephath's flour	Zarephath	1 Kg 17:14-16
Widow's son resurrected	Zarephath	1 Kg 17:17-24
Fire from heaven on Mt Carmel.	Carmel	1 Kg 18:30-38
Drought upon Elijah's prayer	Israel	1 Kg 17:1; Jm 5:17
Elijah fed by ravens	The Brook Cherith	1 Kg 17:6
Rain upon Elijah's prayer	Israel	1 Kg 18:41-45
Elijah given speed to outrun a chariot	From Carmel to Jezreel (16 miles).	1 Kg 18:46
Elijah fed by an angel then fasted 40 days	The wilderness near Beersheba	1 Kg 19:1-8
Ahaziah's captain and 50 men killed by fire from heaven.	Samaria	2 Kg 1:10
Ahaziah's second captain and 50 men killed by fire from heaven.	Samaria	2 Kg 1:12
River Jordan divided	Jordan	2 Kg 2:7-8
Ascent to heaven	Jordan	2 Kg 2:11

Elisha		
River Jordan divided	Jordan	2 Kg 2:14
Waters of Jericho healed	Jericho	2 Kg 2:21-22
Elisha's curse causes she-bears to kill 42 men	Bethel	2 Kg 2:24
Water for Jehoshaphat's army	Moab	2 Kg 3:16-20
Widow's oil multiplied	Shunem	2 Kg 4:2-7
Shunammite's son resurrected	Shunem	2 Kg 4:32-37
Toxic stew purified	Gilgal	2 Kg 4:38-41
100 men fed with 20 loaves	Gilgal	2 Kg 4:42-44
Naaman cured of leprosy	Samaria	2 Kg 5:10-14
Leprosy inflicted on Gehazi	Samaria	2 Kg 5:20-27
Iron axe-head floats	Jordan	2 Kg 6:5-7
Elijah's prescience	Dothan	2 Kg 6:12
Opening eyes of servants to heavenly visions	Dothan	2 Kg 6:17
Syrian army struck blind	Dothan	2 Kg 6:18-20
Syrian army cured of blindness	Samaria	2 Kg 6:20
Elisha's bones revive the dead	Elisha's tomb	2 Kg 13:21
Daniel / Jonah		
Deliverance from fiery furnace	Babylon	Dan 3:19-27
Daniel in the lion's den	Babylon	Dan 6:16-23
Sea calmed	Mediterranean Sea	Jonah 1:15
Jonah in the belly of the great fish	Mediterranean Sea	Jonah 2:1-10
Gourd grows for shade then dies	Nineveh	Jonah 4:5-7

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