

On Miracles and Revelation

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Introduction

The word *miracle* is one of several Biblical words that have been “wordnapped,” redefined, and misused. *Miracle* is popularly used to describe a spectacular game-winning catch of a football in the end zone, a person who somehow escaped the wrath of a tornado, or the providential answer to a prayer. The “religious” con men on TV have amassed fortunes by confusing a gullible public with their pseudo claims of miraculous powers.

The Meaning of *Miracle* in the Bible

What is the Bible definition of a “miracle”? The Greek word *dunamis* (ability, power—the origin of our word *dynamite*) is used in reference to actions and results beyond mere natural means in several passages, and is thus frequently translated “miracles” (e.g., Acts 8:13; 19:11; 1 Cor. 12, 10, 28–29; Gal. 3:5; et al.). Another Greek word, *semeion* (a sign, mark, indication, or token) is often rendered *sign*, indicating supernatural phenomena that are demonstrations of Divine authority and power (e.g., Mat. 12:38–39; John 2:11; 3:2; 20:30; et al.). However, this word is also translated “miracles” in some passages (e.g., Luke 23:8; Acts 4:16, 22). Peter used both of these Greek words on Pentecost: Jesus was “...a man approved of God...by mighty works [*dunamesis*] and wonders and signs [*semeiois*] which God did...” (Acts 2:22).

Therefore, a miracle is not merely something unusual, amazing, extraordinary, or remarkable. It refers to the power God has exercised and demonstrated, either immediately or through agents (human or otherwise), which transcends that which men alone can do or which can occur by natural law (cf. John 3:2). The Bible teaches that God no longer thus demonstrates His power. To say that He once did, but no longer does, is not to deny His power, but to affirm His plan. It is not a question of what He **could/can** do, but of what He **is doing**. Upon what evidence can we positively affirm that miracles have ceased?

Explicit New Testament Teaching

Paul gives us the most concentrated treatment of first century miraculous gifts in 1 Corinthians 12–14. He lists the diverse gifts and appointments that God “set in the church” originally (12:8–11, 28–30). He then states that there is one thing (at least) that is superior to them (v. 31). That “most excellent way” is Biblically-defined love, apart from which miraculous powers and great sacrifices are as worthless as noise and are vain and unprofitable (13:1–3). Paul then defines love by personifying it with a long list of beautiful behaviors (vv. 4–7).

Paul's exaltation of the beauty and meaning of *love* leads him to contrast its duration with that of the miraculous gifts (vv. 8–13). He first affirms that “love never faileth” (lit., “not even at any time falls”) thus declaring its unending nature (v. 8a). He immediately states antithetically that there are some things that will not last so long: prophecies, tongues, and knowledge (representative of all of the miraculous attributes of chapter 12) (v. 8b).

Paul uses three lines of argument to declare the cessation of the gifts:

1. He **explicitly states** that the gifts will end. Prophecies would be “done away” (“fail,” KJV), tongues would “cease,” and knowledge would be “done away” (“vanish away,” KJV) (v. 8). Paul used the same word (*katargeo*) twice (in reference to prophecies and knowledge), a powerful word that means to render useless, unproductive, or of no effect (the same word he used to describe what happened to the authority of the law of Moses upon the death of Christ, Eph. 2:15). Of tongues, he used another very strong word (*pauo*) that means to cease, stop, or come to an end (cf. Luke 5:4; Acts 21:32; Heb. 10:2; et al.). Although verse 8 does not tell us when these gifts will cease or what will signal their end, Paul undeniably affirms that they will end.
2. He tells us **why** and **when** the gifts must disappear, explicitly stating twice that the gifts were only “in part” (*meros*, meaning a fragment, partial, part of a whole, imperfect, incomplete), this time using *know* and *prophecy* as representatives of all of the gifts (vv. 9–10). These “in part” abilities are in contrast to “that which is perfect” (*telios*, brought to completion, entire, complete as opposed to partial or limited). “That which is perfect,” the coming of which would mark the end of the things “in part,” was yet to come (i.e., it was still in the future **at the time Paul wrote**, but no longer so).
3. He employs **illustrations** and **figures** to emphasize the termination of the gifts. He first uses his own childhood behavior (speech, feelings, thoughts) and growth into mature behavior to illustrate the normalcy of the cessation of the miraculous gifts (v. 11). Paul's childhood represents the “infant” (i.e., incomplete, imperfect) state of revelation, and his behavior as a child represents the spiritual gifts common to and appropriate (yea necessary) for that incomplete stage of revelation. However, Paul did not remain a perpetual child—he grew up and “became a man.” His attainment of maturity and his consequent (and appropriate) change of behavior represent the development of revelation to its “mature” (i.e., complete, perfect) state. Paul's arrival at maturity therefore symbolizes the arrival of “that which is perfect” (v. 10a), whereupon and when the infantile behavior (“that which is in part”—the miraculous gifts) would be discarded (*katargeo*, same word as for “done away,” v. 8) (v. 10b).

Paul then employs the figure of looking into a mirror to further explain the foregoing illustration (v. 12). *See in a mirror* is a figure for receiving revelation, not then complete in the “childhood” state at the time Paul wrote, but still in the process of being given. These limitations made the “image” in the “mirror” hazy (lit., an enigma) because they did not have the full revelation of God’s will. *But then face to face* is a figure for seeing a clear image in the “mirror.” That is, when the “mature” state of revelation would arrive—when “that which is perfect” came (still future at the time Paul wrote these words)—the image would be clear. They had knowledge only “in part” because of the incompleteness of the revelation at that time. With the completion of revelation they would be able to see clearly because they would know God’s will fully.

Some contend that *that which is perfect* (v. 10) refers either to the Lord’s return or to Heaven, but they are wrong for numerous reasons, the discussion of which is not in the purview of this treatise. In this context Paul is plainly referring to the completed revelation of God’s will through the apostles (John 16:13) and the cessation of the miraculous element at the time of that completion. Just as he closed chapter 12 by declaring that love is superior to the non-abiding spiritual gifts, so he closes chapter 13 by declaring that it is superior even to its abiding companions of faith and hope (v. 13).

The Purposes of Miracles Have Ceased

God has used miraculous activity for four purposes, not one of which any longer exists:

1. **He has used miracles to establish and create.** He brought the material universe into existence by the mighty creation miracles, thereupon enacting His natural laws by which the physical universe has operated to this day. All living things since then have come about by procreation rather than by creation (with the notable exception of our Lord’s conception). The Mosaic Age began amidst many mighty miracles, but with the last utterance of its last prophet the Old Testament was complete and miraculous activity disappeared (perhaps partly explaining the 400 year intertestamental silence). The Christian Age began with momentous miraculous activity (viz., the angelic announcements to Zacharias and Mary, the Virgin Birth, Jesus’ mighty signs, His resurrection and ascension, the wonders on Pentecost, the impartation of powers to the apostles, et al.). It is no mere coincidence that miraculous activity ceased soon after the completion of the New Testament revelation. Unless God decides to establish or create something new, this purpose of miraculous activity no longer exists.

2. **God used miracles (particularly the gift of prophecy) to edify the infant church** (1 Cor. 14:3–6). However, this was one of the gifts of which Paul specifically said it was “in part” and would be “done away” with the coming of “that which is perfect” (13:8–10). When the fullness of the revelation was theirs, it would contain, in a preserved and permanent written form, all that any who would live thereafter would ever need for edification (Acts 20:32; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; et al.). Those who faithfully preach the message of the inspired New Testament prophets now edify the church, so this purpose of miracles no longer exists.
3. **God used miracles to reveal His Divine Will and Truth.** Jesus promised the apostles that He would send upon them the Holy Spirit, Who would teach them all things and guide them into all of the Truth (John 14:26; 16:13). Paul declared that God revealed the words he and the other apostles spoke and wrote (1 Cor. 2:10–13). He did not learn the message he preached from men, but “through revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11–12; cf. Eph. 3:3–5; 2 Pet. 1:21). By this means his words were the “commandment of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37). By the end of the first century “the faith [was] once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Therefore, this revelatory purpose of miraculous activity no longer exists.
4. **God used miracles to confirm the Truth and its proclaimers AS IT WAS BEING REVEALED.** John stated this as the great aim of Jesus’ miraculous activity (John 20:30–31). The Lord gave first century believers miraculous powers to confirm their preaching (Mark 16:17–20). God confirmed and bore witness to the “great salvation” the apostles preached by “signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will” (Heb. 2:4). Since the revelation of God’s will was complete by the end of the first century, and since the purpose of New Testament era miracles was to confirm the Word, with the completion of the revelation, the confirmatory purpose of the gifts no longer existed.

Even so, some allege that God’s Word still needs confirming. However, note the following:

1. The first century saints confirmed **their own words**, not those of Moses or the prophets, just as Moses and the prophets confirmed their own words, rather than those of Job or Abraham.
2. Once confirmed (as it was while being revealed) the New Testament needs no additional confirmation. Just as it was “once for all delivered” (Jude 3) it was also once for all confirmed. John’s statement concerning Jesus’ signs remarkably attests to this fact. Although John could work the “signs of an apostle” and lived through the age of miracles, he stated that the **written record** of the signs which Jesus did was sufficient confirmation of Who He was so that one might believe on Him unto salvation:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30–31).

3. **Confirmation and revelation are inseparable.** If we have miraculous confirmation today, we should have new, continuing revelation. If we have no new revelation, there is no miraculous confirmation today. Those who insist upon the continuation of miraculous gifts beyond the New Testament era are unwittingly seeking to impose a perpetual “childhood” state upon revelation and the church. They are implicitly arguing that we do not have a perfected, completed Bible, but one that is only “in part.”

Conclusion

New Testament miracles are like scaffolding on a building, temporary and necessary only during construction. When the building is finished, the builder removes the scaffolding, as indeed God did the miraculous gifts when His revelation was completed. That revelation is all sufficient to save us (Rom. 1:16), to make us complete unto every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and to take us home to heavenly glory at last (Acts 20:32). No alien sinner needs either any (1) miraculous direct operation of the Holy Spirit or (2) “non-miraculous” direct operation of the Holy Spirit in order to be saved from the guilt of his sins or to be saved in Heaven at last. Likewise, no saint needs either any (1) miraculous direct operation of the Holy Spirit or (2) “non-miraculous” direct operation of the Holy Spirit in order so to live as to be saved in Heaven at last. We have the inspired, revealed, and confirmed-by-miracles message of Truth, the all-sufficient Scriptures.

Endnote

All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the October 2003 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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