

An Introduction To A Series Of Four Talks On The Bible Miracles

Of all that is written in our Bibles few things are - in many people's minds - more 'suspect' than the miracles which are spoken of and described there. So far as the teaching of the Bible is concerned, at least for the most part, and the overall historical accuracy of events as they are recorded there, there is not a great deal of concern. But when it comes to the miracles it tends to be a different story. Miracles, of course, defy scientific explanation. And, as is so often the reaction of the man in the street today, if something cannot be scientifically explained, then it is not to be believed.

There are miracles described both in the Old and in the New Testaments. Many of them. Amongst those in the Old Testament are those associated with the escape of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt (the parting of the Red Sea, for example), and those which were performed by the prophets Elijah and Elisha. The destruction of Jericho was very much in the nature of a 'miracle' as was the rescue of Jonah. But possibly even better known to us are those miracles spoken of in the New Testament, especially those said to have been performed by the Lord. The very manner of His conception was a miracle. No human father was involved. So also was His resurrection. But, also, look at the things He did. Jesus, it is said, "cast out devils" (Matthew 8, 28); He restored paralytics (Matthew 8,13); gave sight to the blind and speech to the dumb. He healed leprosy (Luke 17,19) and even raised people from the dead (Luke 7,15 and John 11,44). As well as this, and perhaps even more remarkably, He calmed a storm (Matthew 8,26), walked on water (Matthew 14,26) and miraculously fed thousands of people on two different occasions.

Some unhesitatingly speak of these miracles as 'legends' which were later attributed to the Lord. Others look for an alternative explanation of them, accepting that certain things did happen, but not in the miraculous ways they are said to have done. It is the same with the Gospels, in a way, as it is with the Bible as a whole. As for the teaching there, people have no great quarrel. It is widely accepted that what the Lord spoke about and taught during His life on earth is of immense significance and that the ideals He set before people are beyond comparison. But when it comes to the miracles, it is a different thing. People are willing to regard the Lord as a great man and an important teacher. They are not nearly so ready to concede Him having had supernatural or Divine power. Hence the manner in which the miracles have, in many cases, come to be regarded. As I said, with much doubt and scepticism.

No one can 'prove' that the miracles attributed to the Lord took place as they are described. No one can 'prove' that He possessed the extraordinary powers He is said to have done; the extra-sensory perception or the ability to give a person sight who had never previously enjoyed it (see John 9), And we are certainly not going to try to do so. As in all matters of religious belief, the Lord leaves us in our freedom to come to our own conclusions. Whilst one person may unreservedly believe that these miracles took place, that same person cannot convey his or her certainty about them to another. These are things we have to think about ourselves. After considering all the relevant information we must arrive at our own conclusion. The fact that miracles defy scientific explanation must not, however, be allowed to put us off. There are a great many things which defy scientific analysis and explanation. That we have got to try to do is to see the miracles in the context of the Lord's life, of the purposes of His being in the world, and of the use He would want them to be.

Bible commentators speak of the Lord's miracles as things done by Him out of concern and compassion for people in their suffering, Certainly His own feelings entered into things. Luke tells us that as the Lord was about to enter into the city of Nain a dead youth, the only son of his widowed mother, was carried out. "And when the Lord saw her (saw the widowed and sorrowing mother, that is) "He had compassion on her, and said unto her, Do not weep." And He proceeded to raise her son to life again. But it would be wrong to think that miracles were performed solely out of compassion and for no other reason. Unquestionably, other factors were involved.

At a time when few people were prepared to believe in the Lord or to accept that He was the Messiah, miracles were needed to strengthen people's convictions about Him. Swedenborg wrote of this as follows:

"Miracles were performed in the time of the apostles in order that the Christian Church might be established. This was because it was entirely unknown everywhere that the Lord had come into the world, who would save souls; and because it would never be received without miracles."

There was, we repeat, far more to the miracles than things done by Jesus out of compassion to those who were suffering. To be sure, this was involved. But the Lord also knew that miracles were vitally necessary to confirm the very tentative faith of His early followers. We all know the vacillating, how there was uncertainty. Even those who were closest to the Lord were not quite sure of who He was. Miracles testified to the Lord's divine power. They were a form of re-assurance.

People could not be otherwise than impressed. They would be, and often were, a starting point from which people would go forward into a deeper appreciation and acceptance of the Lord and of what He stood for and came to teach. So vital, in fact, were the miracles Jesus performed that in their absence the Christian Church would never have been established. And in the absence of a continuing witness to the Lord through the Christian Church much of what He had come on earth for would have been carried out in vain.

But what of miracles, in general, and of the miracles such as Jesus performed, so far as you and I are concerned, today?

The first thing to be said is that the need for miracles to be openly performed, such as existed at the time Jesus was on earth, does not exist now. This is not to deny that miracles happen or that miraculous things take place. But the pressing need of New Testament times; the need to get people's attention; the need to awaken their interest and curiosity; in the hope of so leading them on into a deeper faith and acknowledgement; just does not exist now. In any case, the Gospel descriptions of the miracles are sufficient for the child mind and early investigator of Christian claims and beliefs. It is not as if more miracles are required for this purpose.

The second thing to note is this, that open miracles are, not generally part of Christian life and experience because they compel, or frighten people into belief, and belief which is merely based on compulsion or fear is not really belief at all. The point is that as soon as the cause of the fear, or what it is that compelled belief, is removed, so questioning, doubt, and rejection sets in. We know exactly how it was with the Israelites in Old Testament times. Some of the most impressive miracles of all times were performed before their very eyes and yet within weeks they were back-sliding and rejecting God who had performed them.

"It is asked at this day" wrote Swedenborg "why miracles are not done, as formerly; for it is believed that if they were done, everyone would acknowledge with the heart. But the reason miracles are not done at this day, as before, is that miracles compel, and take away free will in spiritual things; and, from spiritual, they make a person natural." (*True Christian Religion* 501).

Again,

"It cannot be denied that miracles induce faith, and strongly persuade that that is true which he who does the miracles says and teaches; and that this in the beginning so takes possession of the external of the person's thought that it as it were binds and fascinates it. But the person is thereby deprived of his two faculties, which are called rationality and freedom."

But to go back to the miracles as described in the Old and Now Testaments, especially those performed by Jesus: apart from their importance where the establishment of the Christian Church was concerned, they also have a continuing importance which this short new series of talks is designed to highlight. We affirm the reality of the miracles, that the great majority of them took place as described. We can appreciate the purpose they served in awakening people's intense interest and curiosity. But their continuing importance lies in the promise they hold out to us of the possibility of the healing of the sicknesses of soul and spiritual life with which we all - though in different ways - are afflicted.

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