

The Moral Danger of Miracles

by David Larson

“Have you ever seen a miracle in your medical practice?” I asked a thoughtful Christian physician who is a department chairman at a large medical school. “No,” he replied after a reflective pause, “but my father, who practiced medicine until he was 90, said he once saw one, but only one.”*

Authentic miracles, especially genuine instances of dramatic supernatural healing, are rare. Sometimes their infrequency prompts great perplexity.

Some wonder if there is something wrong with God. Maybe God doesn’t exist, doesn’t care, or doesn’t possess the power to perform miracles. But for those of us who have other reasons for confidence in God’s reality and goodness, these “solutions” don’t help.

Others suppose that there is something wrong with our prayers. Maybe we don’t have the right presuppositions, procedures, or priorities. If only we would learn to pray appropriately, they insist, we would see more miracles. But this “answer” doesn’t work either. We all know at least one person who was not miraculously healed even though his or her prayer life seemed exemplary in every way.

Then there are those who suspect that there may be something wrong with the praying person that is visible only to God. Maybe he or she lacks faith. Perhaps God needs to admonish or chastise him or her with some dreadful illness. Or does God possibly want to warn someone against waywardness? Such insinuations are destructive because they cause us to look askance upon those whom we would otherwise have every reason to

respect. Besides, sickness is not always a sign of faithlessness. Sometimes it takes more faith to live with an illness than to die from it.

Some blame the church and its leaders. The church is so spiritually ill and its ministers are so corrupt, they contend, that God cannot bless us. This “answer” also fails. No denomination is perfect, every adult knows that. And ministers do make mistakes, sometimes big ones. But like all professionals, they usually do the best they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves. So why blame them?

Why blame anyone?

Maybe miracles *should* be rare! Perhaps the primary difficulty is not you, me, or anyone else but the morally questionable consequences of miracles. And maybe it is spiritually immature to hunger and thirst for them instead of for love and justice.

Much depends, of course, upon how we define the word *miracle*. Some say that miracles are events that “contradict the ‘laws of nature’.” But this misunderstands the logical status of “laws of nature.” Such norms are human summaries of the way humans think the universe works. These laws are neither fixed nor infallible. If an event actually contradicts one of our “laws of nature,” our formula must be revised so as to provide room in an intelligent way for the unexpected occurrence.

This is why it is more helpful to think of miracles as events that defy the laws of nature as *we presently formulate them*. Those among us who know the most insist that our scientific knowledge is still embarrassingly meager. Something that amazes us may seem quite normal to someone who is better informed. Although this way of thinking about miracles can have some

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problems of its own, it is superior to the first approach because it humbly recognizes how limited human knowledge currently is.

But even with this definition, we do well to pause before concluding that life would be better if we experienced more miracles. Miracles, even by the second definition, often yield ethically unsavory consequences. Some of these consequences are so morally distasteful that we can be exceedingly grateful that God performs them only very, very rarely. God takes great risks when performing a miracle. The results, all things considered, to human eyes hardly seem worth the hazard.

Do We Really Want More Miracles?

Miracles can prompt unrealistic expectations. A child reads a story about someone who prays and miraculously finds a lost pen. The youngster also prays. But his or her computer disk remains lost. Hope was raised and then dashed in ways that can be spiritually damaging. Some young people struggle with such damage well into their adult years. A medical oncologist once informed me that his deeply religious students, interns, and residents often exhibit more frustration in the face of death and dying than those who are spiritually casual. Disillusionment is a genuine temptation for those who expect miracles more frequently than they occur. Such persons sometimes dodge the acids of bitterness only with great courage and effort. Why make things more difficult?

Miracles can encourage us to avoid personal responsibility. Every doctor has had at least one patient who refused to take the steps that would bring healing because he or she expected God to perform a miracle. This is nothing new. Some “saints” in past ages refused to bathe, believing that God would cleanse them if he wanted them washed. Many live unwisely and intemperately and then beg for divine deliverance from the consequences of their choices. If God honored such requests at every turn, we would become increasingly dependent and decadent. God must

have more noble hopes.

Miracles can create an addiction to the exotic and spectacular. Including miracles in worship services is the spiritual equivalent of snorting cocaine: exhilarating at times but ultimately exhausting. Those who feed their souls on miracles sometimes find it difficult to follow a sustained line of reasoning. Physically and emotionally, as well as intellectually and morally, they become dependent upon religious thrills. This can deafen one to the still, small voice that says, “Come, let us reason together.”

Miracles can frustrate the quest for greater knowledge. If miracles are events that confront our present understandings of the universe, and if miracles are desirable, it follows that the less we know about the world the more miracles we will experience and the more delighted we will be. This approach, whether expressed or implied, places a religious premium on ignorance. What an odd way to honor the one who gave us the ability and desire to learn! And how dark and dank are the seas of superstition that such counterfeit piety produces! If the New Testament can worry about those who prefer conceptual milk to meat, what would it say of us when we choose the garbage of gullibility?

Miracles can tempt us to exploit the vulnerable.

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The history of religion is peppered with accounts of wandering miracle-workers who took advantage of persons made vulnerable by poverty, illness, or lack of formal schooling. Some modern religious movements have returned to such questionable practices when their institutions faced severe financial pressures. “Getting back to our religious roots” they call it. But those who plunder the weak by claiming that God will reverse their ill fortunes if they contribute to the speaker’s favorite cause bring dishonor upon all who seek financial support for worthy ventures in

honorable ways. And the exploitation—raunchy and gaudy though it is—continues every day.

Miracles can distract us from the many ways God graces us moment by moment. A heart beats. A child laughs. Spouses forgive each other for angry words and harmful deeds. A bud blossoms. A colt stretches, wobbles, and then prances! A prodigal daughter or son calls home. A wound, physical or emotional, begins to heal. These are life's primary wonders. But they can be overwhelmed by the heavy rhythm and blinding light of those who conjure the unusual. Theologians refer to routine reminders of God's goodness as "common grace." Unfortunately, miracles often frustrate our ability to see such signs and to hear such whispers.

Miracles can tempt us to wallow in idolatrous hero-worship. Sophisticated miracle workers frequently remind their audiences that their powers are divine gifts, not innate abilities. And they do so even as they turn down the lights and focus the spotlight upon themselves! It is as though they never heard of the one from Nazareth who frequently asked those whom he healed not to noise it about. Some of these modern healers are frauds. Others have been seduced by their own propaganda. Either way, God gets eclipsed.

Miracles can prompt severe doubts regarding God's fairness. If one person is miraculously healed, why aren't the others when we are praying for them all? A friend once asked why it is that God reportedly answers trivial requests ("Oh Lord, help me find my keys! I'm already late!") and then seems distant when someone in a genuine crisis pleads for help? Is this fair?

I once heard a distinguished medical educator explain why he left the employment of a university operated by a famous evangelist and healer. He found himself one day in the school's gymnasium watching one of the evangelists claim to heal many of minor ailments. Just a few yards away in the school's medical center a young Christian woman lay grieving the loss of a leg that had been amputated at her torso because of a malignancy. The doctor left that institution partly because he could not bear to see God portrayed as such an unfair and capricious healer.

Miracles can frustrate God's attempt to let sin

unfurl its true results. Sin is often alluring because it conceals its dreadful consequences. One of the worst results of sin is that it causes innocent people to suffer, as evidenced by the cross upon which Jesus died. Each one must discern this about sin for himself or herself so that each person can thoughtfully reject it. Sin, understood as a conscious and deliberate decision to do that which one honestly believes is wrong, is a permanent possibility. Christianity lives by the hope that sin in this sense need not be an eternal actuality. But if God always spares us from sin's unfair conse-

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quences, we are unable to make informed decisions.

Miracles can overwhelm personal freedom. A "yes" to God is meaningful only when it comes from someone who can say "no." Such freedom is fragile. Miracles can overwhelm it with coercive evidence that God is sovereign. But God, as portrayed in the Bible, yearns for the affection of friends, not the obeisance of subjects. God therefore abides with us as the New Testament says Jesus walked beside the two travelers to Emmaus: close enough to be felt and heard, but concealed enough to be tested and found true.

These morally questionable consequences of miracles, together with others that could also be mentioned, cast great doubt upon our maturity as Christians when we long so thoroughly for God to reverse the misfortunes of our lives in spectacular supernatural interventions. Sometimes we become bitter or perhaps even cynical when things go on and on pretty much as usual. We also reveal our spiritual infancy when we blame ourselves or others for the infrequency of miracles in our day, or when we attempt to excite ourselves and others into heightened states of religious fervor that will ostensibly "allow" God to perform them more often. Such actions and attitudes are ethically retarded and theologically infantile, even though they are increasingly prevalent in some

circles. True saints and sages of all eras declare that immature Christians experience God in the extraordinary, whereas mature Christians discern God in the ordinary. When the ordinary is examined more closely, it is not so mundane after all.

Should We Be So Suspicious?

One objection to this conclusion is that in biblical times, because the devout were allegedly more faithful than they are now, God performed many more miracles. But if we divide the number of miracles the Bible reports into the number of years its stories cover, we will see that miracles were rare in biblical times as well. Furthermore, the miracles of the Bible are not evenly dispersed. They are clustered around five pivotal periods: Creation, Exodus, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus, and the Second Coming. There are long periods of time between these transition points when miracles are infrequent even in the Bible. The pattern throughout the Old and New Testaments is that God sometimes risked miracles, but usually didn't. And this has been the case for as long as anyone can remember.

The Bible's portrait of the 13th king of Israel exhibits its confidence in the possibility of miracles as well as its hesitancy regarding their moral worth. By all accounts, Hezekiah was a ruler of extraordinary ability, whose tenacity in conflict was recorded even by the Assyrians. But when Isaiah informed him that he was mortally ill, Hezekiah wept bitterly and pled for divine deliverance. Hezekiah's pleas were "effective" by some standards because he lived for another decade and a half. But he may have often wondered if it was worth it. For 10 of his final years, Hezekiah shared the throne with his son Manasseh, an evil king who reestablished soothsaying, augury, spiritism, human sacrifices, and who shed innocent human blood without reserve. Death must have finally come as a gift too long delayed for Hezekiah, whose own antagonism toward religious superstition of every sort had led him to destroy even the bronze serpent associated with the healing of Moses because it had become

a relic of foolish fascination.

Another objection is that Adventism has always had a high regard for miracles. And yet, as evidenced by the publications associated with James and Ellen White, the attitudes of those who established the Seventh-day Adventist denomination eventually paralleled the Bible's hesitancy regarding the moral worth of miracles. But this maturity did not emerge overnight.

In a broadside published in 1849, Ellen White wrote that Adventists should "not dishonor God by applying to earthly physicians, but apply to the God of Israel. If we follow His directions (James 4:14, 15) the sick will be healed. God's promise cannot fail."¹

Ellen White was not alone in her early negative thoughts about human medicine. In an obituary for Josiah Hart, a 41-year-old pastor who died leaving a wife and five children after struggling against a fever for nine weeks in 1858 without medical care, Joseph Bates reported that at one point Mrs. Hart asked "if we thought it would be pleasing to God for us to let him die without calling for medical aid?" "We replied," Bates wrote with no trace of regret, "that we had been following the directions which God had given us in the Bible and that was all, and the best that could be done."²

Such unfortunate attitudes were prompted in part by the questionable therapeutic methods of some physicians in 19th-century New England. But even "natural remedies" were apparently condemned by some Adventists. L.V. Masten, for instance, declared in the *Review and Herald* in 1853 that "I admit that God has given us 'roots and herbs,' and let such as have no faith use them! I am fully persuaded that God is well pleased to hear prayer for the sick."³

Following the death of Sister Prior, who died without medical assistance, Ellen White explicitly condemned the attitude of rejecting even the use of natural or simple remedies. "We believe in the prayer of faith," she wrote, "but some have carried this matter too far, especially those who have been affected with fanaticism. Some have taken the strong ground that it was wrong to use simple remedies. We have never taken this position, but have opposed it."

She went on to declare that “in some cases the counsel of an earthly physician is very necessary.”⁴

As 19th-century medicine improved, and as her attitudes regarding faith and medical science matured, Ellen White’s remarks regarding the work of physicians became increasingly positive. Speaking of the Adventist health work at Battle Creek in 1867, she insisted that “no one obtain the idea that the Institute is the place for them to come to be raised up by the prayer of faith. That is the place to find relief from disease by treatment, and right habits of living, and to learn how to avoid sickness.”⁵ However, she added that “if there is one place under the heavens more than another where soothing, sympathizing prayer should be offered by men and women of devotion and faith it is at such an institute.”⁶ In 1870, she felt that it was “time that something was done to prevent novices from taking the field and advocating health reform” because “it is a great responsibility to take the life of a human being in hand. And to have that precious life sacrificed through mismanagement is dreadful.”⁷

A generation later, Ellen White declared that none should “cherish the idea that special providences or miraculous manifestations are to be the proof of the genuineness of their work or of the ideas they advocate. If we keep these things before the people they will produce an evil effect, an unhealthful emotion.”⁸ And in 1899 she declared that the physician “occupies a position even more responsible than that of the minister of the gospel.”⁹

A third objection is that to be morally suspicious of the longing for miracles is akin to the teachings of the deists that God created the universe and the norms by which it functions and that now God almost indifferently lets the world run on its own. But Christians today must thank deism for its helpful criticisms of superstition and excessive sectarianism, as well as for its attempts to reconcile the doctrine of divine providence with what were new scientific discoveries when the modern era began. Also, the sheer simplicity of deism’s fivefold summation of genuine religion still exhibits an undeniable elegance: (1) belief in the Supreme Being, (2) the need to worship God,

(3) a virtuous life as the most acceptable form of worship, (4) the importance of repentance for one’s failures, and (5) hope for life eternal.

And yet, deism probably did not sense as profoundly as we should God’s continuing role in the universe as that reality which maintains, moment by moment, the links, however we understand them, between cause and effect, apart from which neither good nor evil could be actualized. The deists may well have overlooked what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote that in everything God works for good.

The doctrine of divine omnipresence means

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more to us than that “God is everywhere.” This notion means that there is no circumstance, no matter how tragic or painful, in which God is not present as a personal power and powerful person, gently inviting us and enabling us to bring as much joy for ourselves and others as at all possible from life’s fortunes and misfortunes. This persistent, provocative, progressive, and personal impulse for good in every moment of every life can be observed in magnificent works of creativity, whether artistic, literary, scientific, or political. But more importantly, it can be seen when people cope with loss courageously, or transform their personal disappointments into opportunities for service. This continuing, evocative, and universal activity of God is what the deists may have missed.

Perhaps the most disturbing objection is that to be suspicious of the morality of miracles is to make prayer pointless. This objection is unfortunate because prayer, when honorable, attempts to change us, not God. Prayer enables us to understand our circumstances more accurately, to list our options more imaginatively, to select among our alternatives more wisely, to live with the pluses and minuses of our choices more cheerfully, and to accept the limits and opportunities of life more graciously. In these ways, prayer en-

ables one to combine the joys and sorrows of one's life into a work of art whose brilliance and

shadows coalesce as a joyful response to divine love.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

*These musings about miracles are offered in honor of Timothy R. Smith, M.D., a brilliant scholar, skilled clinician, and loyal friend whose courage and cheer in daily struggles against a debilitating disease inspire all who know him.

1. Ellen G. White, "To Those Who Are Receiving The Seal of The Living God" (a broadside from Topsham, Maine, dated January 31, 1849). I am indebted to Dalton D. Baldwin for these references.

2. Joseph Bates, "Obituary," *Review and Herald*, XII:16 (September 2, 1858), p. 127.

3. L.B. Masten, "Faith," *ibid.* IV: 13 (October 4, 1853), p. 101

4. Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts, My Christian Experience, Views, and Labors in Connection With the Rise and Progress of the Third Angel's Message* (Battle Creek, Michigan: James White, 1860), p. 135.

5. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 1, p. 561.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Testimonies*, 2, p. 386.

8. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 2, p. 48.

9. White, *Testimonies*, 5, p. 439.