

ON MIRACLES

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PREFACE TO 2002 EDITION

This book is an adaptation of a series of short sermons that I had delivered on the radio. While preparing them for print, I had taken the liberty to revise and improve them. Significant changes were made in some cases, and they have also been greatly abridged. Although many had expressed their appreciation for the original version of these sermons, I am convinced that they are now even more accurate and helpful than before.

This series of sermons is entitled, *On Miracles*. In them, I deal with several topics relevant to the supernatural power of God. I discuss Jesus Christ as a miracle worker and healer, as well as one who bestows upon his people the power of the Holy Spirit to work miracles in their witness for him, and to demonstrate his mercy to the nations. The issues of counterfeit spiritual power and persecution resulting from the use of spiritual gifts are also examined.

Although brief and simple, the messages that follow take the word of God seriously, and will challenge the reader to live for our Lord Jesus Christ more passionately, intelligently, and confidently.

1. JESUS THE MIRACLE WORKER

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter preached to a number of Jews who had heard the disciples speaking in tongues. When the people asked, "Who does this mean?" (Acts 2:12), Peter stood up and preached. After quoting the prophecy of Joel, he said, "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know" (v. 22). Our topic for this chapter is Jesus the Miracle Worker.

In the verse quoted, Peter says that Jesus was a miracle worker when he was on the earth. And if he is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), he must still be a miracle worker today. Just because he is not physically present in the same way that he was during his earthly ministry does not mean that he is less inclined to work miracles. Rather, miracles are even more likely since he is no longer limited to working miracles only one place at a time. He can simultaneously demonstrate his mighty power and grace in different parts of the world. If he was a miracle worker when he was on the earth, he must be a miracle worker now.

Nowadays, many people limit God's power to his providence – that is, his control and guidance over the natural circumstances of this earth. For example, although Joseph was sold to slavery by his brothers, God was directing his steps all along: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Romans 8:28 tells us that, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

We do not question the teaching of God's providence, but that is not what we mean by a miracle. We are referring to an act of God that is more apparently supernatural, such as the parting of the Red Sea, although not necessarily as spectacular. Let us, using several biblical passages as examples, briefly discuss the miracles of Jesus over nature, spiritual entities, and disease.

John says of Jesus that, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3), and Paul writes that, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). Naturally, we should expect him to possess power over nature.

One miracle of this sort is recorded in John 2:1-11, where Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding: "On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.' 'Dear woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. 'My time has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by

the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water'; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, 'Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.' They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, 'Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.' This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him."

Jesus changed one physical substance into another, something that no man can accomplish simply by willing or saying it. But this is not difficult for one who had created and structured all matter. Through this miracle, he "revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him."

Another passage records that Jesus had walked on water: "Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down" (Mark 6:45-51). We see that even during his ministry on earth, he had the power to dominate nature.

In another place, he commanded the sea to be still, and it was said that even "the winds and the water...obey him": "One day Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let's go over to the other side of the lake.' So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Master, Master, we're going to drown!' He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. 'Where is your faith?' he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, 'Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him'" (Luke 8:22-26).

In the beginning, there was no matter, and God created the universe out of nothing. Although he had "five loaves of bread and two fish" in his hands, Jesus demonstrated a hint of this creative power by feeding more than five thousand people with them: "'We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,' they answered. 'Bring them here to me,' he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left

over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children" (Matthew 14:17-21).

We must move on to the miracles showing his power over spiritual entities – these are the cases where he expelled demons from people: "The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!' 'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!' The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him'" (Mark 1:22-27).

The demons recognized Jesus as "the Holy One of God," and so cried out in despair. But he "drove out the spirits with a word" (Matthew 8:16). Never had there been one like him in all of history, and the people exclaimed, "A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." And his disciples discovered that, "even the demons submit to us in your name" (Luke 10:17).

As for his healing miracles, the apostle Peter says that, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and...he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38).

But does he still perform miracles today? The evidence decisively says that he does. Not only does the Bible say that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), but when Peter ministers to a paralytic in Acts 9, he says to him, "Jesus Christ heals you" (v. 34). Jesus had already ascended to heaven, and Peter was the one physically present, but yet he said it was Jesus Christ who healed. Certainly, Jesus still works miracles. And when Jesus performs his signs and wonders in and through his church today, God will be glorified, and the body of Christ will become strong.

2. JESUS THE HEALER

Jesus Christ was, and is, and always will be a miracle worker. And he will be a miracle worker to you and through you if you will believe him. The Bible says that he is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). If he ever was a miracle worker, then he is also one today.

Although we have briefly mentioned the healing miracles of Jesus, I would like to put emphasis on him being a healer in this chapter. That is, not only is Jesus Christ a miracle worker, but he is also a healer.

From Acts 2:22, we learned that Jesus was a miracle worker while he was on the earth, and since he remains the same, he is also one today. But in another passage, Peter says, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and...he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38).

Note that those whom Jesus healed were "under the power of the devil," but Jesus was the one who healed them. It is the devil who oppresses people with sickness, but it is God who heals them. This passage says that "God was with" Jesus when he "went around doing good and healing" the sick. This gives us an indication as to the disposition of God to heal those who are sick.

God said to the people of Israel, "I am the LORD, who heals you" (Exodus 15:26). This does not only constitute a promise to heal, but it is a revelation of God's own nature and his identity in relation to his people; that is, he is our physician.

Psalm 103:2-3 exhorts us to praise the Lord, and "forget not all his benefits," saying that he not only "forgives all your sins," but he also "heals all your diseases." If we accept one part of the verse, we must also accept the other. If we believe that God is one who forgives our sins, then we have no reason not to believe that he is also the one who heals our diseases.

Let us turn to several examples of the healing work of Jesus Christ. We will begin with Mark 1:40-42: "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured."

Many people are in the same position as the leper in the sense that they are certain of God's power to heal, but they do not have assurance that he is willing to do so. So, they say, "Jesus, if you are willing, you can heal me." Of course, that in itself is a true statement – it is true that Jesus can heal you if he is willing. However, that is not an

affirmation of your faith in his healing grace, but simply a recognition of the logical implication of his omnipotence. If God can do anything, he can heal you, but that does not say much about whether it will actually happen. Our faith concerning healing must carry more information than God's omnipotence. We must be able to relate his power to our condition, and God has given us this needed information through the Scripture. In other words, the Bible does not only tell us that God is all-powerful, but it also relates his power to our needs in such a way as to help us know his will on the matter.

Look at the answer Jesus gives in this passage. He responds to the leper by saying, "I am willing...be clean!" And "immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." Jesus told the leper that he was willing to heal him – not only did he have the ability, but he was also willing to use it to heal our bodies.

Some of you may object, saying, "But Jesus was only saying that to the leper. How do I know that he is also willing to heal me?" We should understand that the passages in Scripture, although often directed at certain individuals, have implications for us when properly understood. The nature of the Scripture is such that, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). Further, Paul writes in Romans 4:20-25 in relation to justification by faith, that although the words, "it was credited to him as righteousness" refer to Abraham, they were "written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

And this passage in Mark 1:40-42 tells us what we need to know concerning God's will to heal us. It does not only tell us that Jesus said he was willing, but also the reason for his willingness to heal. It says that Jesus was "filled with compassion," and that is why he was willing to heal. Most people who doubt God's willingness to heal them believe at the same time that God is compassionate. But his compassion toward us also means that he is willing to heal our bodies. God's nature does not change – if he is compassionate yesterday, he is also that way today. There is no reason to believe that he was compassionate in the past and healed as a result, and that he is still compassionate today, but does not heal.

On another occasion, the Bible records an incident from which we may learn what great faith is, and the authority of Jesus over diseases: "When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 'Lord,' he said, 'my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.' Jesus said to him, 'I will go and heal him.' The centurion replied, 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.' For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.' When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.' Then Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.' And his servant was healed at that very hour" (Matthew 8:5-10, 13).

The centurion told Jesus that it was unnecessary for him to enter the house to heal the servant, but all he needed was for Jesus to "say the word." He explained why he thought that this would work from his understanding of military authority: "For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes." He implied that Jesus had the same kind of authority over diseases, so that all he had to do was give a verbal command.

The passage continues to say that, "Jesus was astonished and said to those following him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.'" The people of Israel were supposed to have great faith, but it took a gentile military officer to recognize the authority of Christ over creation, including our bodies. Obviously, we are encouraged to have this kind of faith. We should believe that God has authority over his creation and that his words "are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body" (Proverbs 4:22).

Matthew 8:16-17 says, "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.'" Once again, we see the authority of Jesus over sicknesses, and this time over demons as well. "With a word," he "drove out the spirits," and "healed *all* the sick." His redemptive ministry is one which "took up our infirmities and carried our diseases," so we no longer have to endure them.

Psalms 103:1-3 reminds us that God's healing nature is one of his attributes that demands our praise: "Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases." Part of worship is to be at awe at and give thanks to God for who he is. If that is true, then his healing nature is certainly one that we must not neglect. Besides worshipping him as our Creator, Savior, and Judge, we must also worship him and give him thanks for being our Healer.

3. MIRACLES AND YOU

We have been discussing the fact that Jesus Christ is a miracle worker. He has authority over all of creation, and he still demonstrates his power through signs and wonders today. Specifically, Jesus also exercises dominion over demons and diseases, and he is still compassionate as in times past to heal our bodies – he is our healer.

The apostle Peter says in Acts 2:22 in reference to Jesus, "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know." And in Hebrews 13:8, the Bible tells us that, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." We can be confident that what we see him do in the Gospels, we can still expect him to do today.

But we need to believe him. We need to believe that he is a miracle worker and healer. In fact, we are obligated to worship him as such, and we can hardly worship him as healer without expecting him to heal. Jesus says in John 11:40, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" It is due to people's unbelief that they fail to see the glory of God.

Lest the reader try to explain away this verse by attributing some symbolic meaning to what it means to see God's "glory," Jesus was referring to the raising of Lazarus after he had been dead for four days. The Scripture says that when Jesus turned water into wine in John 2, "He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him" (v. 11).

Although God's "glory" does not always directly refer to the demonstration of his miraculous power, it is clearly the case in these two passages in John 2 and 11. So, Jesus is telling us that if we will believe, we will see his glory, as in his miraculous power.

What is exciting is that not only can we expect to see Jesus work miracles today, but he has delegated authority to his people to perform miracles in his name, as his representatives. Even during his earthly ministry, Jesus had sent out the Twelve, and then the Seventy, to preach and to heal, and they "returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name'" (Luke 10:17).

A short time before he ascended into heaven, Jesus extended this authority to all believers: "And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well" (Mark 16:17-18).

Of course, we do not have any inherent power to work miracles, but it is due to our relationship with Christ that we may perform signs and wonders. This is made possible by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit: "But you will receive power when the Holy

Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

However, there are many who claim that miracles are no longer being performed by Christians after the death of the original apostles. Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 13 are often used to support this view: "Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears" (v. 8-10). They interpret the "perfection" here as the completion of the biblical canon, and so the assertion is made that since the Scripture is complete, spiritual gifts had accordingly ceased.

But as John Calvin (1509-1564) says in his commentary on this passage, "Hence we infer, that the whole of this discussion is ignorantly applied to the time that is intermediate" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. XX; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1998; p.428). If the reader finds this translation by the Reverend John Pringle rather obscure, perhaps the one by J. W. Fraser will render Calvin's meaning unmistakable: "It is stupid of people to make the whole of this discussion apply to the intervening time" (*First Corinthians*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1960; p. 281).

According to Calvin, this "perfection" that would make an end of the spiritual gifts will not happen in this life: "But when will that perfection come? It begins, indeed, at death, for then we put off, along with the body, many infirmities; but it will not be completely manifested until the day of judgment" (*Calvin's*, Vol. XX; p. 428). I agree with Calvin's understanding of this passage.

Further, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." Do we now see "face to face"? Or, do we now "know fully," in the same manner that we are at the present "fully known"? John says that it is "when he appears" that "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). It is Paul's desire that "you do not lack any spiritual gift" until "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7-8). Spiritual gifts will not cease until Jesus Christ returns.

Although biblical arguments alone should produce a conclusive verdict, historical evidence is also helpful as illustration and confirmation. Thus, we turn to the writings of Augustine (354-430), who is often cited with approval on philosophical and theological matters, even by those who reject present-day spiritual gifts.

Even when writing to address readers in his own period, Augustine says, "It is sometimes objected that the miracles, which Christians claim to have occurred, no longer happen" (*The City of God*; New York: Image Books, 1958; p. 512). Of course, by his time, the original apostles had long deceased. Yet, Augustine writes, "The truth is that even today miracles are being wrought in the name of Christ" (*City*, p. 513), and he proceeds to list a number of miracles concerning some of which he says, "I witnessed with my own eyes"

(*City*, p. 514). Thus, both biblical and historical evidences testify to the continuation of spiritual gifts in the Christian's life.

The Bible records an incident in Matthew 17 where the disciples had failed to cast out a demon, but Jesus "rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment" (v. 18). When the disciples asked Jesus to point out the cause of their failure, he said, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith...nothing will be impossible for you" (v. 20). Instead of creating weak excuses for the lack of miracles through making all kinds of impossible hermeneutical contortions with the Bible, let us simply overcome our unbelief, so that we may witness the glory of God in our own generation.

4. MIRACLES AND PERSECUTION

Acts 3:1-9 records a healing miracle done by the apostle Peter: "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!' So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, 'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God."

This is a great healing miracle. This man who had been "crippled from birth" was healed, and was able to walk and jump. Peter said that it was "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" that he had the authority to command the man to walk. This is another example illustrating that Jesus Christ is a miracle worker and healer, even after his ascension to heaven. And as discussed in previous chapters, the church today should still be performing these miracles of healing in the name of Jesus Christ.

However, not everyone will rejoice at a healing miracle done by God's power. Some people are opposed to anything supernatural, while others reject the message that is being authenticated by the miracles. Acts 4:1-3 tells us how some of the religious leaders of that day responded to this healing miracle: "The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day."

Even though an undeniable miracle had occurred, the authorities arrested Peter and John since they were preaching the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And although it was the name of Jesus who healed the crippled man, they "called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18).

Many who work miracles in the name of Christ are also being persecuted nowadays, and often by other professing Christian leaders. Whereas Peter and John were persecuted for preaching Christ, many religious leaders encourage the proclamation of the gospel, but reject any miracles performed to confirm it.

According to them, even though the Bible says in Mark 16:20 that when "the disciples went out and preached everywhere...the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it" (Mark 16:20), this has ceased since the original apostles

died. But this is surely without biblical justification. The better explanation is that many Christians have simply stopped believing in miracles.

Not only do miracles confirm the claims of the gospel, but they also help establish Christianity as exclusively true. When Peter was questioned concerning this healing miracle, he explained that it was "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed" (Acts 4:10). The name of one who had apparently died had the power to heal a cripple man. How could this be? It was because Jesus had been raised from the dead, and he is presently seated at the right hand of the Father.

But the content of the message associated with the miracle goes even further, for Peter went on to say that Jesus is not only one option among many, but he is the only way to salvation: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Miraculous authentication of the gospel is not only one sign that confirms its truth, but also its exclusive status. This is because God only confirms the Christian gospel with miracles, while the alleged miracles done by other religions can be shown as false, or if indeed genuine, suppressed or negated supernaturally by the name of Christ.

Jesus explicitly says in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Just because current thought trends make such a claim unfashionable does not mean that it is a false claim. In fact, we have evidence and strong arguments that theism, and in particular, Christian theism, is the only system of belief that accurately reflects and informs us of reality.

Not a few Christians today have yielded to social and cultural pressure at the expense of the pure gospel message. They concede that Jesus may not be the only way to God, and that even non-Christian religions may bring salvation to sinners. Not only does the evidence indicate otherwise, but based on the unmistakable teaching of Scripture on this subject, we must also question their Christian commitment. To say the least, these people are traitors of the gospel, and a disgrace to the kingdom of God.

After threatening them, the leaders released Peter and John, who then "went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them" (Acts 4:23). The group responded with a prayer to God: "Sovereign Lord...you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (v. 24-30).

Religion is not just a matter of tastes and preferences – those who reject the gospel are God's enemies, and those who persecute Christians are plotting against God, though they "plot in vain." These disciples recognized that nothing takes God by surprise and nothing goes beyond his control, but God's enemies can only do "what [his] power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

These Christians asked to get back into the battle with greater power and boldness. They prayed that God would enable them to courageously proclaim the gospel, even though the leaders had threatened them not to preach. They asked that more miracles of healing be performed through the name of Jesus, even though that is how they got into trouble with the authorities in the first place. But as Acts 5:29 says, "We must obey God rather than men!"

God granted their request: "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (v. 31). Instead of compromising our message and method in this age of pluralism and skepticism, we should pray for God to fill us with boldness to preach the gospel, and to confirm it through irrefutable miracles.

5. AGAINST FALSE MIRACLES

Jesus Christ is a miracle worker. Since he is "the same yesterday and today and forever," he is still a miracle worker today. Not only that, but he has delegated to his people authority to perform various miracles as his representatives. Those who obey his command and proceed to demonstrate his power often suffer criticism and other forms of persecution from religious leaders or skeptics. But there is another source of opposition against the people of God, namely, those who work false miracles – signs and wonders that have their origin in demonic power.

In connection with this latter point, Isaiah 8:19 says, "When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?" The word translated "mediums" here in the NIV is rendered "them that have familiar spirits" in the KJV. Since the term "familiar spirits" is popular in some circles, let us first clarify its meaning.

Concerning this biblical term, the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says the following: "The term *familiar* is used to describe the demon because it was regarded by the English translators as a servant (*famulus*), belonging to the family (*familiaris*), who was on intimate terms with and might be readily summoned by the one possessing it. Thus a familiar spirit is a divining demon, and the ancient world, as well as the modern, had traffic in spiritism, not as mere trickery but as a spiritual reality of evil nature" ("Familiar Spirit"; Illinois: Moody Press of Chicago, 1988).

From the above explanation, we may derive several significant points. A familiar spirit is very much like what contemporary New Age practitioners call "spirit guides." The occultist has a particular spirit (or more than one) that is "familiar" to him, much like a personal friend. The Bible reveals to us that this is in fact a demon. In addition, one popular interpretation of the term is contrary to biblical usage; that is, some say that the familiar spirit is "familiar" to the person who seeks guidance, but the proper understanding is that the evil spirit is in fact "familiar" to the medium. This demon remains with him to empower his divination. Thus, both the NIV and the NASB, which translate the term as "mediums," are correct in doing so.

In this verse, Isaiah says that instead of seeking guidance from those who speak by the power of demonic spirits, "should not a people inquire of their God?" Matthew Henry writes, "He furnishes them with an answer to this temptation, puts words into their mouths. 'If any go about thus to ensnare you, give them this reply: *Should not a people seek to their God? What! for the living to the dead!*'... 'Tell them it is a principle of religion that a people ought to seek unto their God; now Jehovah is our God, and therefore to him we ought to seek, and to consult with him, and not with those that have familiar spirits'" (*Henry's*, p. 1095).

It is tragic that many professing Christians are deceived into seeking illegitimate supernatural guidance such as that which comes from psychics and astrologers. These people stand under the condemnation of the prophet's words: "Should not a people inquire of their God?"

Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit, who is the "Spirit of truth," will tell us "what is yet to come" (John 16:13), and Paul writes that it is by ceasing to conform to "the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" that we will be "able to test and approve...God's...perfect will" (Romans 12:2). Further, Paul reminds Timothy that all of Scripture is inspired by God, and is sufficient to prepare "the man of God...for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Do the so-called Christians who seek these mediums find the Scripture insufficient for general and specific guidance? Yet, most of them may admit that the Scripture is sufficient. Then, is it because they have exhausted the content of Scripture without discovering the answer they need? But most of them have never spent much time studying the Bible. The Scripture reveals that their hearts have turned against God, and proceed to defy his direct command. Christians have no business reading books written by psychics or going to consult astrologers.

The power of God is greater than that of the false gods. Throughout the Bible, God gives us illustrations of his dominance over other spiritual operations or entities. Let us examine several examples:

When God sent Moses to Pharaoh, he gave him a sign, namely, that Aaron's staff would become a snake when thrown to the ground. When Pharaoh's men "did the same things by their secret arts," "Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs," thus demonstrating God's superior power: "So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs" (Exodus 7:10-12).

Another example comes from Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal. It was agreed that both parties would petition their deities to send fire from heaven. While there were four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and fire did not fall for them, Elijah prayed to God by himself, and "the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38).

When we turn to the New Testament documents, we find a number of recorded incidences of a similar nature: "Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, 'This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.' They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were

baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw" (Acts 8:9-13). The "great signs and miracles" following Philip were so impressive that even Simon the sorcerer, who had previously "amazed all the people of Samaria," was astonished by the power in the name of Christ.

In Acts 13, Paul confronts "Elymas the sorcerer," and supernaturally effected temporary blindness in him, "But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun.' Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord" (v. 8-12).

On another occasion, Paul expelled an evil spirit out from a girl who had a "spirit of divination" (NASB): "Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling...Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her" (Acts 16:16-18).

Such passages are not merely useful for us as a matter of historical interest – I am convinced by Scripture that the Christian is authorized to confront satanic power by supernatural means. And my personal experience has confirmed that such conflicts are both possible and desirable.

Similar evils as those described in the Bible are present today, but God's power is still the same – if we will only have faith in God's power, for "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

6. PRAYING FOR MIRACLES

It may be true that miracles are still possible today, that God still performs signs and wonders, but that does not automatically settle the question of whether we should actively pursue them. There are those who think that God may do the miraculous if he so wills, but it is presumptuous of us to ask him for it. This is the issue that we will discuss in this chapter.

As Professor Wayne Grudem points out in his *Systematic Theology*, the answer to our question "depends on the purpose for which miracles are sought" (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994; p. 370). There are a number of invalid reasons for seeking miracles. For example, "it is wrong to seek miraculous power to advance one's own power or fame" (Ibid., p. 370), and it is self-evidently inappropriate to seek miracles due to one's curiosity, or for entertainment purposes. Further, Jesus refused to accommodate those who asked him "to show a sign from heaven" (Matthew 16:1) in order to test him.

But "it is important to note that rebukes against seeking signs are always directed against hostile unbelievers who are seeking a miracle only as an opportunity to criticize Jesus. Never does Jesus rebuke anyone who comes in faith, or in need, seeking healing or deliverance or any other kind of miracle, whether for himself or herself, or for others" (Ibid., p. 370). Thus, I agree with Grudem's conclusion on the matter, that "There is nothing inappropriate in seeking miracles for the proper purposes for which they are given by God: to confirm the truthfulness of the gospel message, to bring help to those in need, to remove hindrances to people's ministries, and to bring glory to God" (Ibid., p. 370).

We should now elaborate on this point by examining several passages from Scripture. Jesus says in Mark 16:15-20, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." Evidently, a miracle ministry is closely associated with the task of evangelism. We have no right to accept verse 15, where it says to preach the gospel, and at the same time consider verse 18, where it says to lay hands on the sick, as inapplicable.

Then, to relate miracles specifically to the act of prayer, since that is our topic, we turn to James 5:15: "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up." Here, it is stated that a healing miracle will occur as a result of our prayer, "offered in faith." At least concerning the topic of healing, this verse has answered our question as to whether we should pray for miracles.

However, this passage in James does not limit our petitions for the miraculous to only one area. Verses 16-18 continue to say, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." Elijah, in accordance with God's word (1 Kings 17:1; Deuteronomy 11:16-17, 28:23-24), had effected a miracle of nature through his prayer. To illustrate how "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective," James uses Elijah and his miracle of nature as an example, but reminds us that he was still "a man just like us." In other words, the power and effect of "the prayer of a righteous man" is not limited to the area of physical healing. The Bible grants that God will answer prayers requesting interventions of various kinds, including physical healing and miracles of nature.

Finally, let us see what we can learn from a prayer uttered by the early Christians, as recorded in Acts 4: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (v. 29-30). They asked God to give them boldness, to heal, and to "perform miraculous signs and wonders." Christianity is also being threatened today in different ways in various parts of the world. Some attacks are intellectual, while others are political in nature, with the latter at times resulting in the violent deaths of Christians. The solution endorsed by the early disciples is reflected in this prayer – what we need is greater boldness to preach the gospel and even more miracles from God. Attempts to design a better way to promote Christianity are futile – such efforts often result in the Church's accommodation to the secular world rather than the transformation of society by the power of the Gospel.

7. THE NAME OF JESUS

Not long before the crucifixion of Jesus, he said to his disciples, "In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:23-24). In another place, the apostle John writes, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15). When taken together, these two passages assure us that the Father will grant our requests when we pray in the name of Jesus, and the range of possibilities in our prayer are clearly set forth as that which is "according to his will."

By saying that we should pray in accordance with God's will, John is not implying that we cannot know whether our prayers will be answered. Rather, he says that it should give us "confidence...in approaching God." In short, John is saying that it is possible to know God's will, and then make requests to God that is consistent with this knowledge. And when we do, we should be confident "that we have what we asked of him."

So, our confidence in prayer comes from knowing God's will. And as we have established in previous chapters, physical healing is God's will for his people. But in John 16:23-24, we read that God will grant us what we ask from him in the name of Jesus, and so we will examine in this chapter how to bring about healing in accordance with the promise of God by the name of Jesus Christ.

Even before the death and resurrection of Jesus, his name seems to have carried extraordinary authority, to the extent that the disciples said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name" (Luke 10:17). Further, an anonymous individual was casting out demons in the name of Jesus: "'Teacher,' said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us'" (Mark 9:38). And the passage seems to imply his success in this endeavor: "'Do not stop him,' Jesus said. 'No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us'" (Mark 9:39-40).

After his resurrection, the name of Jesus is especially exalted, and its authority explicitly affirmed in the Scripture: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phillippians 2:9-11).

There are numerous passages that relate the use of his name with the healing ministry. Prior to his ascension, Jesus had promised the disciples that various "signs will accompany those who believe." Specifically, "In my name...they will place their hands

on sick people, and they will get well" (Mark 16:17-18). When James tells us to anoint the sick with oil in conjunction with "the prayer offered in faith," he says to do it, "in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14-15).

However, only believers in Christ may exercise such authority, for it is not the mere sound of his name that causes diseases to depart and demons to submit. One who is authorized to speak in the name of Jesus is one who is identified with him, and thus acts as his representative. Demons do not fear those who speak in the name of Jesus, but in fact have no relationship with him: "Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, 'In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.' Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. [One day] the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding" (Acts 19:13-16). On the other hand, when "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there," the Bible says, "With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed" (Acts 8:5-7).

What is the difference? The apostle Peter, having healed a crippled man by saying to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6), later explained that it was "By faith in the name of Jesus" that "this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see" (Acts 3:16). That is, only a Christian may exercise this authority over sickness and demons, since only a Christian has "faith in the name of Jesus." But this faith "comes through him," and thus, even this is a gift of God.

8. THE LAYING ON OF HANDS

The Bible says in Hebrews 6:1-2 that the laying on of hands is one of the "elementary teachings about Christ," although it seems that many Christians are ignorant concerning this doctrine and its application. Rousas J. Rushdoony points out that, "The word *hand* has an important symbolic meaning in the Bible. It is a symbol of might and power, and to speak of the hand of the Lord is to speak of His power and protection. Lifting up the hands can be a symbol of violence (1 Kings 11:26), of supplication (Ex. 9:33; 17:11; Ps. 28:2), and of blessing and benediction (Gen. 48:13, 14), and much more" (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2; Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1994; p. 715).

Since "The various symbolic uses of *hand* constitute in themselves a substantial study even in summary form" (Ibid., p. 715-716), we shall only mention several scriptural uses of the laying on of hands without much elaboration, but will give additional focus to its application in the healing ministry.

In the Old Testament, the laying on of hands is associated with presenting animal sacrifices to the Lord: "He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him" (Leviticus 1:4). But there are other purposes for the practice such as blessing one's descendants, as well as to ordain individuals to positions of responsibility. Spiritual gifts were also bestowed through this ritual: "Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses" (Deuteronomy 34:9).

There are at least four uses of the laying on of hands in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit is often given in connection with this practice: "When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:6). Simon the sorcerer saw such a connection between the giving of the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands that he offered money to the apostles specifically so that he may also bestow the Holy Spirit through putting his hands on others: "Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, 'Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 8:17-19).

The laying on of hands also has to do with ordaining Christians to ministerial positions: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2-3). And once again, there is a strong connection between this practice and the ordination of ministers, so much so that Paul warns Timothy not to "be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Timothy 5:22). If one ordains another without first being certain of the person's calling

and character, then the one who ordains may become responsible for the new minister's subsequent sins, thus Paul's "do not share in the sins of others" (v. 22).

There is a general consensus among scholars on this interpretation, seeing that "Most recent versions and commentaries favor the interpretation that this passage prohibits hasty ordination." And the reason for this warning is that, "If Timothy ordained an elder, he thereby became in a measure a surety for this person's character and thus was implicated in any sins the man might commit" (*Expositor's*, Vol. 11; p. 381).

In connection with ordination, spiritual gifts may also be given by the laying on of hands. Paul reminds Timothy to "fan into flame" the spiritual gift, which was given to him "through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6). This gift is "not an ordinary gift of God's grace, such as every Christian may seek and obtain according to his need; but it is the special grace received by Timothy to fit him for his ministerial functions" (*Ibid.*, p. 395). This does not necessarily mean that spiritual gifts may only be given within the context of ordination, since they can be placed in a person by God without any human mediator.

It should be obvious even to the casual reader of the New Testament that the laying on of hands had a prominent function in the healing ministries of Jesus and the apostles. Although it is clear from a number of passages that Jesus could heal without touching the sick person, at times he chose to do so, even when there were many who needed his ministry: "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them" (Luke 4:40).

On the island of Malta, Paul brought healing to a man "suffering from fever and dysentery" through the laying on of hands: "There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him" (Acts 28:7-8).

Contrary to the opinion of some, the authority and power to heal through the laying on of hands is not limited to the apostles. Jesus said that "those who believe" will be able to "place their hands on sick people, and they will get well" (Mark 16:17-18). As pointed out in a previous chapter, if verse 15 of this passage is still in force, then verses 17-18 must still be applicable to every believer. If cessationism is denied, then there is no reason to think that Christians may not lay hands on the sick and see them recover nowadays.

A relevant question is "whether the laying on of hands conveys any special power in itself" (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984; p. 627). W. L. Liefeld writes that, "Scripture itself does not attribute power to the act except in the case of healing. Even here it is not magical..." (*Ibid.*, p. 627). I would certainly agree that the practice is "not magical," even if it involves genuine spiritual power. He

also points out that "Timothy's gift was received through (*dia*) prophecy, but with (*meta*), not through, the laying on of hands" (Ibid., p. 627).

But if this argument based on the distinction between *dia* and *meta* were to hit its mark, Liefeld would have to explain why Paul says Timothy's spiritual gift was given "through the laying on of my hands," with "through" being *dia* in Greek. If the spiritual gift was given with (*meta*) the laying on of hands in conjunction with the prophecy of the elders, but was given by, or through (*dia*) the laying on of hands of the apostle Paul, then this may only be an indication that it was through Paul's hands that Timothy received the spiritual gift, although the elders had also laid hands on him and prophesied. If so, there is still room to think that the laying on of hands involves an actual transfer of *charisma* even in the context of ordination, and is not purely symbolic.

This point cannot be fully debated here. But it should be agreed that although ordination and the giving of spiritual gifts involve the practice of the laying on of hands, its effects are subject to God's control (Romans 12:3-6; 1 Corinthians 12:11, 18). Nevertheless, Scripture predicts specific effects for those who receive the ministry of the laying on of hands for healing, namely, "they will get well."