

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(Acts Special – The Purpose of the Sign Gifts – Part 1)

Introduction

In our study of certain passages in the Hebrew Scriptures (a.k.a. the “Old Testament”), we have observed many instances of the power of God displayed through supernatural phenomenon. Examples include the visions and dreams of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the parting of the Red Sea at the hand of Moses; the supernatural and prophetic revelation resulting in the amazing prophecies of the Hebrew prophets (some of which have already been fulfilled) – just to name a few.

In God’s universe He is both immanent and transcendent. The powers of nature are limited, but God is able to introduce unto infinity therein whatever He wills to do. His own works as manifest in creation and providence are hardly to be classed as miracles. They are rather the normal works of God in His own particular sphere of action. What is natural with God may be supernatural with man.¹

In our study of the Gospels, we have observed many occasions on which Jesus performed miracles of healing, cast out demons or raised the dead (e.g. Matt 4:23-25; 8:1-17, 26, 32; 9:18-34; 12:13; 14:13-36; 15:29-39; 17:14-21; 20:29-31). The Twelve Apostles of Jesus to Israel were granted authority over demons and power to perform miracles of healing (Matt 10:1, 5-7).

In our study of the book of Acts, we have seen examples of miraculous manifestations of the power of God in and through the lives of believers.

- The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers on the day of Pentecost was attended by the supernatural phenomenon of people speaking in foreign “tongues” – languages in which they were not trained and which were not their native language (Acts 2:4).
- Philip performed miraculous signs in Samaria which drew crowds of people, many of whom became believers and who received the Holy Spirit when the Apostles Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem and laid hands on them (Acts 8:5-7, 13-17).
- Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, received instructions from God through a vision (Acts 10:3) which was immediately followed by a vision received by Peter (Acts 10:10-21) that prepared Peter for presenting the gospel to Gentiles. When Peter explained that Jesus was the promised Messiah/Redeemer Who fulfilled the prophecies of Scripture, Cornelius and his household believed, experienced the supernatural outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and spoke in tongues (Acts 10:43-48).
- In Acts 19, Paul encounters twelve disciples of John the Baptizer in Ephesus. After explaining to them the distinction between the gospel of John (a gospel of repentance in anticipation of the coming kingdom and the coming Messiah) and Paul’s gospel (Jesus was the Messiah promised by John and through Him there is salvation), they spoke with “tongues” and “prophesied” once Paul had baptized them, laid hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 19:5-6).
- Later, in the same city, Paul was able to perform miracles and heal the sick (Acts 19:11ff).

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), Volume VII, 239.

These are just a few of the many instances in Scripture of miracles and supernatural intervention by God. What was the purpose of these miracles? Are miracles still legitimate today? If not, then why? If they are not legitimate, then what is the source?

Definition of a “Miracle”

Before we proceed too much further, we should pause to define the term “miracle.” A definition provided by Lewis S. Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary is concise and will suit our purposes. He states that “a miracle, in the strict use of the word, is some special achievement which is outside the known laws of either human experience or nature.”²

In other words, for an event to qualify as a true “miracle,” it must be something that is outside the normal course of events that characterize our daily interaction with nature and this world. The birth of a child, while a marvelous phenomenon, is not in the strict sense a miracle. A beautiful sunset observed in the Colorado Rockies or from an island in the Pacific, while a testimony to the handiwork of the Creator, is not a miracle.

Does this mean that God does not heal today in answer to a believer’s prayer? Does this mean that God cannot respond to the prayer of a husband and wife prior to the conception of a child that the child be healthy when otherwise the child might not have been? Certainly not! However, the parameters by which God has chosen to visibly manifest Himself to man today are different than the parameters that God has chosen to establish in order to govern His interaction with man during other periods of human history as we shall see.

Answers to These Questions During Different Periods of Human History

The Purpose of Miracles Prior to Jesus’ Public Ministry on Earth

Prior to Jesus’ Public ministry on Earth, human history consisted of two groupings of several dispensational administrations – the “Age of the Gentiles” and the “Age of the Israel.”³

² Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume V, 170.

³ The word “*dispensation*” is the anglicized form of the Latin word *dispensatio* which was used in the Latin Vulgate to render the Greek word (*oikonomia*). This Greek word referred to the administration of the affairs of a household and theologically it refers to the manner in which God chooses to relate to mankind and the human agents whom He chooses to be primarily responsible for the receipt, preservation and dissemination of His Truth – His message to mankind. Paul uses the term $\square\text{X}\epsilon\rho\&\square\blacksquare\square\text{X}\diamond\text{C}$ in Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; and Colossians 1:25 in reference to a future dispensation or stewardship, the current dispensation, and a previous dispensation – all of which are distinguished from each other in terms of differing policies governing the relationship between God and man. Thus, dispensations correspond to periods of time in human history; however, a dispensation does not inherently mean a period of time. The position of *The Church of the Servant King* is that there have been at least 8 dispensations throughout human history: 1) Age of Innocence; 2) Age of Conscience; 3) Age of Human Government; 4) Age of the Patriarchs or Promise; 5) Age of the Mosaic Law; 6) Age of the Body of Christ (a.k.a. the Church Age or the Age of Grace); 7) the Tribulation; and 8) Age of the Kingdom of Christ on Earth (a.k.a. the Millennium, the Messianic Kingdom or the 1000 year reign of Christ). Sometimes we use the term “Age of the Gentiles” to refer to the first three dispensations as a group since during these three dispensations, the Jewish race had not yet been established and in order to reduce verbiage where possible. We also sometimes combine our reference to dispensation 4 and 5 and refer to them as the “age of Israel” or the “age of the Law” even though we recognize the technical differences between the two. We recognize the fact that there are transitions between the dispensations during which certain legitimate practices in one period are superseded by a different order (e.g. the transition between the Age of Israel

During these two dispensational periods, Scripture documents occasion after occasion of miraculous interventions by God in the lives of men and human history. There are so many examples that could be cited and most are familiar to even the casual Bible student.

What was the purpose of these miracles during these periods? There was more than one purpose to these miracles.

- Purpose of miracles during the *Age of the Gentiles*
 - To provide divine revelation to man – God communicated directly with Noah and others in order to reveal His Will to man
 - To preserve human history in spite of Satan’s strategy – since human history is the evidence God is using in the appeal trial of Satan, Satan desires to: 1) neutralize the testimony of God through believers; and 2) eliminate the evidence – i.e. human history.
 - To preserve a lineage that would eventually produce the promised Redeemer of Genesis 3:15 – “And I will put enmity between you [*Satan*] and the woman, and between your seed [*unbelievers*] and her Seed [*a reference to the Messiah/Redeemer*]; He shall bruise your head [*the Seed of the woman, the Redeemer, will destroy Satan’s argument in his appeal trial and thus result in the execution of his sentence to the Lake of Fire*] , and you shall bruise His heel [*Satan’s desire to eliminate the Redeemer resulted in the Cross which provides Redemption*].”
- Purpose of miracles during the *Age of Israel* – all of the previous points still apply; however, there is more focused emphasis upon Israel as a theocracy – God’s administrator during that period of history. Also, as the lineage that would bear the Redeemer became more specifically identified, the need to preserve that lineage was sometimes facilitated through miraculous interventions by God into Israel’s history (e.g. the birth of a child to Abraham and Sarah, Joseph’s ability to interpret the dreams of the Pharaoh’s butler that led to his promotion to a high position in Egypt’s government, etc.). Finally, the authenticity of God’s messenger and the message was sometimes validated by the association of that messenger and message with a miraculous intervention by God. On several occasions, the miraculous intervention counteracted a miracle that had been or would be performed in the power of Satan and sometimes the miracle accomplished a dual purpose of effecting judgment upon unbelief (e.g. the Red Sea crossing and destruction of Pharaoh’s army, the miraculous events associated with Elijah on Mt. Carmel when God demonstrated His superiority over the prophets of Baal, etc.).

The Purpose of Miracles During Jesus’ Public Ministry and Life on Earth

During Jesus’ public ministry and life on earth, He performed many miracles of healing the sick, casting out demons and even raising the dead. He commissioned His disciples to do the same (Matt 10:1, 5-7). What was the purpose of these miracles and how were they different from the miracles which occurred in the previous centuries of the Age of Israel and even in the Age of the Gentiles?

The primary difference between the miracles performed by Jesus and those which were performed at the hands of God’s prophets and agents who preceded Jesus is attributable to the fact that Jesus was (and is) the promised Redeemer/Messiah of Israel and the Gentiles. The miracles performed by Jesus accomplished at least three things:

- Validated His claim to be the Son of God
- Validated His message

and the Age of the Body of Christ in the 1st Century A.D.). Finally, we acknowledge the Scriptural basis for considering dispensation 7 as a vital part of the “Age of Israel.” As a matter of fact, dispensation 7 is the last seven years of the “Age of Israel” and is yet future.

- Demonstrated the power of God by which the promised kingdom would be established and ruled

During Jesus' public ministry on earth, the gospel of the kingdom was being proclaimed by Jesus and His disciples (Matt 10:7). That gospel was that the "kingdom of heaven was at hand." This message was directed to Israel (Matt 10:5-6) and was designed to effect repentance (i.e. a change of mind or thinking) on the part of Israel.

The change in thinking that was desired was that Israel would accept Jesus as the long-promised Redeemer/Messiah Who would establish the kingdom once the "times of the Gentiles" (as prophesied by the prophet Daniel) had been fulfilled.⁴ As Israel (and Gentiles) saw the miraculous power of God manifested in and through Jesus and those who carried His message, repentance was the desired effect – a repentance that was necessary by the nation as a whole in order for God to establish His kingdom on earth with Jerusalem and Israel as its headquarters and hub. Of course, this repentance en masse did not occur during Jesus' public ministry nor during the period of years in the 1st Century A.D. following His death, resurrection and ascension.

The Purpose of Miracles During the 1st Century A.D. After Jesus' Resurrection & Ascension to Heaven

The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus were all in fulfillment of prophecy and necessary to make Redemption and its spiritual benefits available to mankind. Therefore, Jesus had to die a sacrificial death – regardless of whether Israel would have responded en masse to His gospel prior to His sacrificial death or not. Scripture is very clear on the point that this response did not occur prior to Jesus' death (nor after His death as we shall see).

Scripture is also very clear on the point that the kingdom offer was extended to Israel after Jesus' death and resurrection. The gospel proclaimed by Peter and others specifically identified Jesus as the long-promised Messiah, a claim that was then validated by the miraculous resurrection of Jesus from the dead and His appearance to so many.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead of which we are witnesses. (Acts 3:13-15)

Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing [a reference to the long-promised Messianic kingdom on earth] may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things [the kingdom and its temporal blessings], which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. (Acts 3:17-21)

So, for a period after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, Scripture documents that a Transition period from the Age of Israel with a kingdom-centric gospel and the Age of the Body of Christ with a gentile-centric gospel. Christ's redemptive work was and is the focal point of both gospels, yet signs associated with the kingdom were needed to validate the

⁴ We must distinguish between the meaning of the phrase "the times of the Gentiles" and the group of dispensations referenced as the "Age of the Gentiles." The former is a reference to the period of human history that spans from Daniel to the 2nd Advent of Jesus – a period during which Israel is dominated by Gentile nations.

message of gospel bearers. As the rejection of this gospel by the nation Israel became full-fledged (with wonderful exceptions on the part of some Jewish believers), the transition into the new dispensation occurred.

The signs and miracles documented in the book of Acts were designed to attend the presentation of the kingdom gospel during Israel's "last days" as prophesied in Scripture (Joel 2:28-32 cf. Acts 2:14-43). Eventually, as the rejection by Israel became full (the major theme of the book of Acts) and the gospel of grace was received with gladness by Gentiles, the transition to the new dispensation was completed and the signs and miracles associated with the kingdom-centric gospel ceased. Paul documents this fact in such passages as 1 Corinthians 13:8. Eventually, during this Transition period, even Gentiles who accepted the grace gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ spoke in tongues (foreign languages) which served as a testimony to Jews that God was going directly to the Gentiles with a message of salvation and hope – a message that a repentant Israel should have been the agents to disseminate. Early in the Transition period, the conversion of the Samaritans by Philip (Acts 8: 8:5-7, 13-17) and the conversion of the Gentile Roman Centurion, Cornelius, by Peter (Acts 10: 3, 10-21, 43-48) would have been (and was) interpreted by the Jews as consistent with Gentile participation in the coming kingdom. Later, during the Transition period as the Jewish rejection was becoming fully realized, the sign gifts began to wane based upon Paul's testimony.

Part 1 – Conclusion

The purpose of Part 1 has been to provide a general introduction to the subject of signs and miracles documented in Scripture. There are still several passages and questions that need to be addressed – specifically regarding the gift of tongues and the other temporary spiritual gifts associated with the Transition period of the 1st Century A.D. We will continue the examination of this subject in a Part 2 of this Special in our study of the Book of Acts in the next session.