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Why Don't We See Miracles Like the Apostles Did?

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Many contemporary Christians feel disconnected from the vibrant, Spirit-filled ministries of the prophets and apostles described in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God seemingly took the people of Israel through miraculous event after miraculous event. In the New Testament, those who watched the ministry of Jesus were seized with amazement at the miracles he performed ([Luke 5:25](#)), and the apostles in the early church regularly performed signs and wonders among the people ([Acts 5:12](#)).

Yet today, such miraculous events seem rare and, when we do hear reports of miracles, many Christians are skeptical. At the very least, we feel there's *something* different about the way God worked in the Old and New Testament periods and the way he works today. This raises a valid question: Why don't we experience today the miracles we read about in the New Testament?

To answer that question, we need to understand not only how God works through [providence and common grace](#), but we must also understand the purpose of miracles in the Bible.

Purpose of Miracles in Scripture

Miracles in Scripture are acts of God that proclaim his sovereign power over creation as well as his commitment to the good of his people. Miracles are often significant because they serve a larger purpose in God's redemptive plan, testifying to the authenticity of God's messengers who bring his revelation to humanity. This is one of the primary functions of miracles in the scriptural narratives: "When miracles occur, they give

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evidence that God is truly at work and so serve to advance the gospel.”¹ Miracles authenticate God’s message and his messengers.

In the Old Testament, Moses did miracles to demonstrate his authority as God’s spokesman ([Exod. 4:1–9](#)). Similarly, the prophets were given words to speak from God, and in order to verify their authority God granted them the ability to perform miracles ([1 Kings 17:17–24, 18:36–39, 2 Kings 1:10](#)).

Whereas “the miracles of the Old Testament age authenticated Moses and the prophets as men of God,” Robert Reymond notes, “the miracles of the New Testament age authenticated in turn Christ and his apostles.”² [2] Nicodemus, for example, recognized that God was with Jesus because of the miracles he did ([John 3:2](#)). Luke records approximately 20 of Jesus’ miracles, and four—all healings—are unique to only Luke. Jesus’ miracles authenticate his authoritative role in the divine plan that brings salvation ([Luke 7:22](#)). In fact, the scope of Jesus’ healings shows the breadth of his authority. He heals the sick, casts out evil spirits, and cures a variety of specific conditions: a flow of blood, a withered hand, blindness, deafness, paralysis, epilepsy, leprosy, dropsy, and fever. He resuscitates the dead and exercises power over nature.

Miracles also point to God’s kingdom and the restoration of creation. John calls the miracles of Jesus “signs” ([John 4:54, 6:15](#)), and Jesus suggests that his miraculous works verify that the kingdom of God has come ([Luke 11:14–23](#)). Jesus performed healings, exorcisms, and “nature” miracles (such as turning water into wine and multiplying food) as a sign that God’s kingdom had come to earth. As Wayne Grudem puts it, one of the purposes of miracles was “to bear witness to the fact that the kingdom of God has come and has begun to expand its beneficial results into people’s lives.”³ This is the point of what Jesus says in [Matthew 12:28](#): “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Because of Jesus’ miraculous works, those who saw him knew that the God of Israel was once again acting in their midst.

Tim Keller says that miracles

lead not simply to cognitive belief, but to worship, to awe and wonder. Jesus’ miracles in particular were never magic tricks, designed only to impress and coerce. . . . Instead, he used miraculous power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead. Why? We modern people think of miracles as the suspension

¹ Wayne Grudem (1994). *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 360.

² Robert L. Reymond (1998). *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 412.

³ Grudem, 360.

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of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order.⁴

Jesus' miracles reveal his divine identity—an identity that calls for worship. This is the response of the disciples after Jesus walks on the water: “Truly you are the Son of God” ([Matt. 14:33](#)). When asked whether he was the “one who is to come” ([Luke 7:19](#)) Jesus, instead of answering with a word testifying that he is the Messiah, points to his miracles. Luke's portrayal of Jesus is focused on his authority and the promise he brings. Jesus' saving work inaugurates the kingdom of God, delivers sinners, secures forgiveness of sin, and provides the Spirit. Grudem's description of miracles in the Old and New Testaments is worth quoting at length:

It seems to be a characteristic of the New Testament church that miracles occur. In the Old Testament, miracles seemed to occur primarily in connection with one prominent leader at a time, such as Moses or Elijah or Elisha. In the New Testament, there is a sudden and unprecedented increase in the miracles when Jesus begins his ministry ([Luke 4:36–37, 40–41](#)). However, contrary to the pattern of the Old Testament, the authority to work miracles and to cast out demons was not confined to Jesus himself, nor did miracles die out when Jesus returned to heaven. Even during his ministry, Jesus gave authority to heal the sick and to cast out demons not only to the Twelve, but also to seventy of his disciples ([Luke 10:1, 9, 17–19](#); cf. [Matt. 10:8](#); [Luke 9:49–50](#)).⁵

The miracles of the early church, then, served an immediately relevant purpose in redemptive history: verifying the authenticity of God's revelation and signaling the coming of the new eschatological age among God's people.

Consider the Jerusalem Council in [Acts 15](#). One of the largest disputes in the early church concerned whether or not Gentile converts to Christianity had to keep the Old Testament law and be circumcised. It became such a matter of dispute that Paul, Peter, and Barnabas met with the leaders of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to debate the issue. It's noteworthy that, as [Acts 15:12](#) says, “all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.” Here the miraculous works of God served as evidence to the Jewish Christians that God was in fact working in a new and unique way among the Gentiles as well.

⁴ Timothy Keller (2009). *The Reason for God*. New York: Penguin, 95–96.

⁵ Grudem, 359.

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Miracles Today

So how should Christians think about miracles today? First, we must realize that the sheer volume and close proximity of the miracles in the Bible served significant purposes in God's redemptive plan at the time. However, this point doesn't mean that miracles have ceased today. Indeed, as Grudem notes, "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."⁶ Miracles still happen, and Christians should avoid the two extremes of seeing everything as a miracle and seeing nothing as a miracle.

Second, Christians need to expand their understanding of God's action to include both his providential sustaining in daily affairs and also his miraculous works of redemption in the church. For example, in [John 14:12](#), Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." But it isn't immediately clear what Jesus means when he says that those coming after him will do "greater works." Some may think that these "greater works" refer to more miracles and other such events. However, D. A. Carson's insights here are helpful:

Greater works . . . cannot simply mean more works—i.e. the church will do more things than Jesus did, since it embraces so many people over such a long period of time—since there are perfectly good Greek ways of saying "more," and since in any case the meaning would then be unbearably trite. Nor can greater works mean "more spectacular" or "more supernatural" works: it is hard to imagine works that are more spectacular or supernatural than the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the multiplication of bread and the turning of water into wine.⁷

The "greater works" done by those coming after Jesus point primarily to the new eschatological order established by Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension.

The "signs" and "works" Jesus performed during his ministry could not fully accomplish their true end until after Jesus had risen from the dead and been exalted. Only at that point could they be seen for what they were. By contrast, the works believers are given to do through the power of the eschatological Spirit, after Jesus' glorification, will be set

⁶ Grudem, 371.

⁷ D. A. Carson (1991). *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 495.

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in the framework of Jesus' death and triumph, and will therefore more immediately and truly reveal the Son.⁸

And while these works certainly included the signs and wonders done by the early church in the Spirit's power, they weren't limited to those miraculous deeds. Instead, they also included the "mystery" of Gentiles being included into the one new people of God. God's miraculous works in the church include the forgiveness of sins and the inclusion of those who were formerly far off into God's one new people. Healings, signs, and wonders are extraordinary, yes, but no more extraordinary than the redemption accomplished by Christ.

Even if we don't frequently see extraordinary miraculous events, God is active. He is active in the regular (natural) processes we see every day. He is miraculously calling people to himself as his church grows and expands. He is active in miraculous ways among people we don't know around the world.

Whether or not we're privileged to witness obviously miraculous, supernatural events, Christians can be confident that God is actively at work in the world, bringing people to

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⁸ Carson, 496.