



The Miracles of Christ by Wayne Brown

When the Apostle Peter was speaking to the crowds that had gathered at Jerusalem for Pentecost, he said that Jesus had been approved or set forth by God among them by miracles and wonders and signs. This is in Acts 2 verse 22. We need to look into this verse because these were the means which God used to declare the mission of his son.

Miracles were performed in the Old Testament times but we automatically think of Jesus when we hear the word. The verse in Acts is a good starting point. The word miracle is one that we use to describe something outside our everyday experience, or something that we don't understand, the words used in the bible are wider in scope and more specific in meaning.

The definition of a miracle in the Concise English Dictionary is: "an extraordinary event attributed to the supernatural; an unusual or astounding event; a remarkable example of something." The definition of Supernatural is: "relating to things that cannot be explained by nature; involving ghosts, spirits, etc."

Miracle in Hebrew is mo-faith spelt "mowpheth" and the Strong's concordance defines it as... "in the sense of conspicuousness; a miracle, a token or omen, a sign or wonder."

Peter used three words because they each describe different aspects of what we would simply call a miracle. So we will look at 3 divisions. Signs, wonders and mighty works.

Signs

A sign is something which directs. An event or action can be a sign, which is why we say it is significant. Write it down in front of you... significant... it is a word built up from the word sign.

The miracles recorded in the gospel of John are specifically recorded as signs. Although only 8 signs are recorded in John's Gospel, the Apostle says at the conclusion: "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." The signs directed attention to the status and origin of Christ. They shewed forth God's son. In the miracles we see God at work, through Jesus who is approved by Him.

Wonders

The use of the word "wonders" expresses the effect of the miracle. On many occasions we read that because of the outstanding nature of the miracle, those who witnessed it "were amazed;" they "wondered" and so their response came to give the name to the miracle. If we closely mark the occasions on which this particular term is used, we discover that it is never used on its own to describe a miracle. For example, we read in Acts 2 verse 43, "Many wonders and signs were done by the apostles."

This introduces a remarkable truth. Miracles were never performed only for the effect they would create: there were more important reasons for performing and recording miracles. It is possible to think of occasions where there was a temptation to perform miracles for effect, but

where the temptation was resisted. Most notably, when Jesus was in the wilderness after receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, he was tempted to throw himself down off the pinnacle of the Temple as a sign to the people. There would be no other purpose in such a miracle other than to excite the emotions of the crowds witnessing it, this would be an abuse of God's power and provision. The same temptation was repeated and again refused at Calvary: "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27 verse 40). The wonder is that he could have done so, but this was not the path His Father's will had determined.

Mighty works

Where the word "wonder" describes the effect of miracles on the spectators, the words "mighty works" or "powers," often translated as "miracles" describe their cause. They are powerful because the power of God is harnessed and operates through someone God chooses. Whether it is to cure illness or to deliver one from the evil of man's actions. These miracles have a kind of irresistible force; an impelling energy able to invigorate and motivate where previously there has been slackness, weakness or inactivity.

Although these 3 divisions can give an insight into the purpose of a miracle, we should beware placing miracles into one category or another. Possibly each miracle has all of the elements involved in it, even if it appears that one is designed to dominate.

The beginning of miracles

In their separate accounts the Gospel writers introduce the miraculous works of Christ by recording different events. In Matthew it is immediately after the great declaration of his mission in the Sermon on the Mount, that, coming down from the mountain, Jesus was met by a leper and he healed him. His commandment about how sinners should cleanse themselves by faith was reinforced in a visual way for those around to understand. In Mark and Luke, his miracles commence with the healing of a demoniac in the synagogue at Capernaum. He had only just read the prophetic words from Isaiah which described beforehand his ministry of healing: "Preach the gospel to the poor... heal the broken hearted... preach deliverance to the captives... recovering of sight to the blind ... set at liberty them that are bruised."

How better could this word be shown to be a "word with power" than by healing "a man, which had a spirit of an unclean devil?" (Luke 4 verse 16 - 37) But although these incidents are the first records in those three Gospels where Jesus performed miraculous acts, they are not specifically referred to as his first miracle. That honour is given to the events which transformed a country wedding at Cana in Galilee into something which will never be forgotten. It was the occasion when Jesus turned water into wine that is called "this beginning miracles" John 2 verse 11.

But, whereas with the other miracles there seem to be good reasons why they were done, turning water into wine is a strange event to be singled out in this way. It wasn't a miracle which at first sight fits into the categories about which Isaiah prophesied. It could hardly be said that it was the means of "healing the broken hearted," even if there would have been great embarrassment when there was no more wine for the guests. So there must be some reason why, out of all the miracles which were to be performed by Jesus, this one was the first and introductory sign that he was "a man approved of God."

This confusion comes about most probably because the miracles are so often wrongly regarded. Jesus was sent to preach a Gospel of healing, this did not mean he was going to personally solve all the individual cases of suffering which existed in his days. There were many lepers in Israel in the days of Jesus, but he only healed a few of them. The purpose of the miracles was not that suffering should be eased "immediately" but that evidence should be provided that his teaching was according to God's word. Not only was he "the Word made flesh" but that fact could be seen because the prophecies which talked about him were brought to life before the eyes of many witnesses.

The first week

The reason for the miracle and also why it was the "beginning of miracles" becomes clear when it is examined. Jesus had called disciples to him, and the events at Cana took place at the end of the first week of his ministry, a week which was full of significant happenings. John the Baptist had been proclaiming about himself that he was but the forerunner and that there was one coming after him who was preferred before him. The day following this declaration Jesus came to John and was baptized, an act of obedience marked by God when the Holy Spirit power rested on him. For God was well pleased. This became the first day of Jesus' public ministry, when he was declared to be the Son of God.

The next day John called Jesus "the Lamb of God" and two men became his disciples. But the carefully recorded events of the opening week of Jesus' ministry lead forcefully to the significant nature of all that John is inspired to narrate. It was thus on "the seventh day" that "there was a marriage in Cana" just as on the great day of rest there will be the marriage supper of the Lamb. So it was that the "beginning of miracles" in reality pointed to the end, and finally to the time when God will be all and in all.

As the record is carefully read it is clear that the miracle was not performed for the benefit of a "multitude" nor for the purpose of release from great suffering. It was a sign that the work of Jesus would bring about the reunion of man and God. The miracle was therefore for the benefit of the disciples who were to labour with him in his ministry and later to become his apostles, preaching "the gospel to every creature." Certainly the ruler of the feast was unaware of the miracle; possibly the bridegroom was too. Those who did know were "the servants" and the result of the miracle was that "his disciples believed on him."

Jesus second recorded miracle was in the same Galilean village. Between the two occasions an opportunity was taken to celebrate the Passover Feast at Jerusalem. Although there is no record of any of the details, we learn that Jesus did perform miracles while he was there, for "many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did" (John 2 verse 23). Having returned into Galilee he was well received, because the Galileans had "seen all the things that he did at Jerusalem at the feast." When Jesus healed the Noble man's son John writes "This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when he was come out of Judea into Galilee" (John 4 verse 54).

The nobleman was berated for his lack of faith: "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe" (John 4 verse 48). This man was a nobleman, possibly used to ordering people to

carry out his wishes. It was nothing to him to ask the Lord to travel to Capernaum to heal his son. When Jesus replied "Go thy way; thy son liveth" the man pressed no further and "believed the word that Jesus had spoken." So the nobleman had faith and when he returned home his servants said the words of Jesus, "thy son liveth." This was the reward of his increasing faith which then blossomed and bore fruit for "himself believed, and his whole house." Jesus' attitude towards the nobleman teaches that, like his father, he was no respecter of persons, asked by the nobleman to travel to Capernaum to heal his son, he declined but sent the healing word. When asked by a Centurion to "speak the word only" in Matthew 8 verse 8 Jesus proposed to go personally and attend upon the servant. In the first case a poor faith was increased, while in the second a strong faith was rewarded. By not going, the nobleman's faith was enlarged, by offering to go the Centurion's humility was emphasized and honoured.

When Jesus rebuked those who would not believe "except ye see signs and wonders" he was rebuking the attitude of mind which required a sign before belief could commence. The miracle's were not performed for this reason, That is why on so many occasions Jesus commanded those who had been healed as a result of his mighty works not to speak about what had happened.

Jesus was very careful with the way in which he performed miracles. they were certainly a sign that He was the Son of God "with power" but to perform them too openly, or too often, caused multitudes to follow him, not because they were convinced by his teachings, but because they wanted to see other, and even more amazing acts of power.

After the first miracle at Cana, Jesus went up to Jerusalem, for "the Jews' Passover was at hand" (John 2 verse 13). The result of his presence there was that the Pharisees "heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John." He had become a focus of attention by his activities, particularly when the news spread widely that he had swept out of the temple courts the money-changers who had been wickedly making money there for years. In addition, the people who had flocked to Jerusalem to attend the feast were obviously fascinated by the tales, or by their own observation of the miracles he performed at that time. This was a dangerous combination and evoked such hostility in the leaders of the Jews that Jesus "left Judea, and departed again into Galilee."

The healing of a leper in the Gospel of Matthew introduces Jesus as a miracle worker. A casual read of the law of Moses will show the dread and loathing caused by this awful disease which afflicted so many in tropical and sub-tropical countries, including all of the Bible lands. So dire are the effects of the disease that completely separate regulations were in force to assist in the detection, isolation, and treatment. Leprosy is treated differently from other ailments that affect the body. Certain hygienic provisions were made for the majority of diseases, many of them equally repellent, but in the case of leprosy the defiling nature of the disease is emphasized.

Only recently have the hygienic provisions of the Law been understood to be so far ahead of their time. When you realise that only 100 years ago in so called civilised countries there was almost total disregard for hygiene, and that suffering was allowed to exist which could easily have been relieved by an adherence to these Divine principles, the blindness of mankind is something we can hardly comprehend. Even in the case of leprosy, the regulations were there

to limit the spread of the disease and to control any undue reaction or panic which could easily be caused if there was an outbreak. But despite all the regulations the disease could only be controlled, it could not be eradicated. So at all stages of Bible history, leprosy was a great curse.

Moses, Miriam and Gehazi all suffered directly at the hand of God, but there were doubtless many other cases where, because "time and chance happeneth to all" men and women fell prey to the disease for no specific or identifiable reason other than that we are all mortal and suffer the general consequences of living in a sinful world. Such was the horror leprosy created that, as soon as it was diagnosed, sufferers were immediately treated as outcasts. So, just as there were "many lepers in Israel in the time of Eliseus (Elisha) the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4 verse 27), there were also many lepers in Israel when Jesus was walking its streets and hills.

Under the law there was a constraint upon anyone who may have contracted the disease to have regular and specific examinations by the priest. During this period they could live only under controlled conditions, away from family, friends and fellowship. Only if the symptoms did not develop could there be any hope of joining in community life again.

If instead the disease was confirmed, the outlook was bleak. Cut off in this way, it was like a sort of living death; "and the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean....He shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be." (Leviticus 13 verse 45 and 46)

It is hardly possible to understand the effect on the sufferer of this treatment. "For thy sake have I borne reproach; shame hath covered my face. I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children....I made sack cloth also my garment; and I become a proverb to them." (Psalm 69 verses 7, 8, 11) The only way a leper could be readmitted to partake fully of community life was if it could be shown to the satisfaction of the examining priest that the disease had run its course.

"Thou canst make me clean" The leper whose healing is recorded in the Gospels (Matthew 8 and Mark 1) demands our attention. In approaching Jesus, and saying "Lord... thou canst make me clean" (Matthew 8 verse 2), he was acknowledging the power of Jesus'. He was not elevating Jesus above God. It is Mark who records that Jesus was "moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him" (1:41), something which surely no priest would have done. Jesus then sent the man to the priest; it was not because Jesus felt in need of a 'second opinion'. He was to go there and submit to this examination "for a testimony unto them" as was the law. The Gospel writers do not record in this place who it was that needed the evidence. Although the healed leper was sent to the priest, he was also told to "say nothing to any man" so it was not that the evidence was required in some way for the multitude.

"A testimony unto them" In the majority of cases, when a miracle was performed, there are hints that the leaders of the Jews were either there in person, or had sent representatives to watch Jesus. The purpose was to assemble evidence of their own so that they could later convict him.

In all the things which have been written about the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day, one fact comes across: their pedantic insistence on adherence to the Law and traditions. How would they have coped with Jesus, who apparently touched a leper? Was he therefore unclean? The argument could have raged back and forth for a long time. Was he healed before, at, or immediately after the moment of touch? There is, of course, no reason to start such a debate. The important fact, attested to by the priest, was that the man was healed. So far as the Jewish leaders were concerned, this would be of little concern, they were so enraged by the popularity these acts of healing encouraged. The man was not eager to go away from Jesus when he was healed. He had to be "sent away."

No consideration of the miracles recorded in scripture would be complete without reference to the greatest miracle of them all, the resurrection of Jesus. This was a sign confirming his authority. It was publicly displayed and witnessed, but most of those who could have learned from it stopped their ears. They were wilfully deaf and wilfully blind and turned their backs on the great healer who could have cured them if they would but let them.

As we read before, at the conclusion of John's gospel... "many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20 verses 30, 31). If Jesus' own miracles should have taught about his Messiahship, how much more effect should his own resurrection have had both on those who personally witnessed him after he rose from the dead, and on those who have been provided with evidence that he did?

Jesus' miracles are then put into perspective. Wonderful as they were, restoring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb and mobility to the lame they were only indicators of the power he will use in the kingdom. In his own mortality he had "power on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2 verse 10), but he needed himself to be saved out of death before others could have the possibility of sharing in his victory, and before the ailments of sin and death could finally and completely be removed from the earth.

Finally like all other miracles, the resurrection of Jesus is a sign. It is a sign that God will not forsake the world. Sin and death will not remain forever upon the earth. In one of Adams race the process was halted. He is now immortal and incorruptible, and others have the hope of sharing with him the glories of the future age. Our hope of sharing in his reign is dependent on our faithful discipleship.