

In our series of messages "You expect me to believe in miracles?"



Trick or Transformation?

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne March 1, 2009

Welcome: Good morning. Today we're starting a new message series all about miracles. So let me start by asking you, would you like to see me do a miracle? Me too. Only ...

how would you know it's a miracle and not something else? Modern skeptics tend to write things off as optical illusions, or mass hysteria, or hypnotic suggestion. Looking back to miracles in the past we're told they are only legends, stories made up to make naive and gullible people believe in God. After all, people who lived long ago in the time of the Bible were not as sophisticated and smart as we are today and you could probably make them believe anything if you were clever enough. I've been told before that many of the miracles in the Bible could be explained in perfectly logical ways. The star of Bethlehem was a comet, the parting of the Red Sea had something to do with an odd combination of wind and tide. But there's something still about those stories that does not seem so simple to explain away.

For instance, there's the story of the newly converted hippie who was sitting in a coffee shop reading the Bible. Every now and then would exclaim, "Alleluia, that's amazing, man." A skeptic eating next to him at the counter asked what he was reading. The hippie answered, "I was just reading how God parted the Red Sea and let the people go through it safely—hey, man, that's a miracle!" The skeptic explained, "No, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you simply can not believe everything the Bible tells you. The truth of the matter is that that body of water was only really 6 inches deep, so it was no miracle for the people to walk through it." The hippie looked confused, and said, "Wow, major bummer," but kept on reading. Then, all of a sudden, the skeptic heard the hippie let out another big "Alleluia!". At this the skeptic leaned over and asked him, "What is it this time?" The hippie said excitedly in one breath, "Hey man, this one is a real miracle. You know that shallow sea you told me about? Well it seems that God drowned the whole Egyptian army in only 6 inches of water!"

When it comes to miracles, the question is not one of evidence. No evidence in the world will convince a skeptic, and no evidence is needed for someone who believes in them. You might say that you'd believe if you saw one for yourself, but then it's not always possible to trust your eyes. There are people who are good at magic tricks, or illusions. You can't always believe your eyes. Well what about historical records of miracles? Those records leave many people with more questions about whether the eye witness accounts we have could have been forged or faked. That leaves us with looking for scientific proof of miracles. But you know, that won't work either. The whole idea of a miracle is that it breaks the laws of

science, and science does not allow that. As the head of Skeptic magazine has said, there are no miracles, only things science has not yet explained.

The biggest question of all when it comes to miracles is not whether they happened, or whether this thing or that thing might have been a miracle. The place you and I have to start when it comes to miracles is whether or not you think they could happen. If you believe that nature is all there is, there can never be a miracle. Never. If you believe there is a God who created nature and everything you see, then you can accept that a miracle might happen. It is at least possible. But it is not possible at all, if there is no God or if God is just some distant power who can not hear or answer prayers, who can not act or intervene in your life, who only exists in the imagination. Of course, you'd have to wonder what kind of a God that would be. Not a very useful one to be sure.

So let me come clean and tell you what you probably already know. I believe in God. I believe God created the heavens and the earth, that he made all the laws of Science and Nature and if he wants to, from time to time, can bend them a bit. I can offer no proof for this belief, and I do not plan on it. If you are skeptical about that there is no proof I can give you. That's not to say I don't have proof. I do. But that proof is within me, the miracles of the change that has taken place in me because of knowing God. I am not who I used to be, I am not the same as I was years ago, and the only way I can account for that transformation is to see the miracle God has worked within me. And you know, that may be the best kind of miracle anyway ... that change inside of you and me ...

Song: Change inside of me

Pardon me if I've been acting strange,
I haven't been myself lately
What you see is a person rearranged,
Someone affected me greatly
And I've got so much to say,
Ever since Jesus looked my way
Gonna raise my voice like thunder
And leave the world in wonder of the change,
The change inside of me
And I will never stop believing
That you are the reason for this change

Everyday I'm taking in the view of his glory around me
 I'm awake and I have been made new
 By the one who has found me
 Words just can't say enough
 When all I can feel is love
 Gonna raise my voice like thunder
 And leave the world in wonder of the change,
 The change inside of me
 And I will never stop believing that
 You are the reason for this change
 The change inside of me
 Your life you gave for mine to save
 Its nothing less than a miracle
 Your name I praise,
 Because the change inside of me is so beautiful

Worlds are turning and we're just hanging on
 Facing our fear and standing out there alone
 A yearning, and it's real to me
 There must be someone who's feeling for me
 Things look so bad everywhere,
 In this whole world, what is fair?
 We walk blind, we try to see, falling behind in what could be
 Bring me a higher love ... bring me a higher love
 Where's that higher love I keep thinking of?
 I will wait for it ... I'm not too late for it
 Until then, I'll sing my song to cheer the night along
 I could light the night up with my soul on fire
 I could make the sun shine from pure desire
 Let me feel that love come over me,
 Let me feel how strong it could be
 Bring me a higher love ... bring me a higher love
 Where's that higher love I keep thinking of?

Insert prayers and worship music here

Intro the Solo: If all there is in life is what you can see, there's not all that much to this world. If all there is to life is what you can see, what you can hold and what you can have, then you might as well grab for all the gusto and look out for number one and live for the weekend. If all there is in life is what can be seen and studied and known and predicted, we are all stuck in a kind of a trap where the future is totally determined by the past and the choices we make today. But that can't be right. Even the toughest of skeptics feels inside that there should be more to life than only what can be seen or held. But whereas the skeptic feels that inner longing and de-

sponds, others of us feel it and know that longing is leading us to what we desire most. There's simply something inside of you and me that looks at the world and then looks for something more, something

Even the toughest of skeptics feels inside that there should be more to life than only what can be seen or held.

deeper, perhaps even something higher. And for the person seeking God, that something higher comes from him. So no matter how bad things look everywhere, no matter how much in this world seems unfair, inside each of us is the desire for something more ... better ...

Intro the Reading: Where indeed is that higher love I keep thinking of? As a Christ Follower I can tell you I have found it in Jesus, and found that it is a large part of what he has promised you and me. Only to see it, you have to look for it. So come with me on a short expedition for something higher ... and I'll let you in on this. You'll find his promise of higher love in an odd place.

Reading: John 2:1-11

The next day Jesus and his disciples were guests at a wedding celebration in the village of Cana in Galilee ... The wine supply ran out during the festivities, so Jesus' mother spoke to him about the problem. "They have no more wine," she told him. "How does that concern you and me?" Jesus asked ... But his mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Six stone waterpots were standing there; they were used for Jewish ceremonial purposes and held twenty to thirty gallons each. Jesus told the servants, "Fill the jars with water ... then dip some out and take it to the master of ceremonies." When the master of ceremonies tasted the water that was now wine, not knowing where it had come from (though, of course, the servants knew), he called the bridegroom over. "Usually a host serves the best wine first," he said. "Then, when everyone is full and doesn't care, he brings out the less expensive wines. But you have kept the best until now!" This miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee was Jesus' first display of his glory ... (NLT)

Solo: Higher Love

words and music recorded by Steve Winwood

Think about it, there must be higher love
 Down in the heart or hidden in the stars above
 Without it, life is wasted time
 Look inside your heart, I'll look inside mine
 Things look so bad everywhere ...
 This whole world, what is fair?
 We walk blind, we try to see, falling behind in what could be
 Bring me a higher love ... bring me a higher love
 Where's that higher love I keep thinking of?

Intro the Solo: So Jesus does party tricks? Here's Jesus at a party and then there's: "Nothing up my sleeve, and presto chango, your water is now wine, and not just any wine, it's the really good stuff." Wheh. There's been a lot of questions over the years about this miracle. I've been asked why Jesus bothered with this sort of thing, I mean, as far as miracles are concerned this seems pretty lame. No one was healed, no one was saved from drowning. What's the point of it all? To answer that you need only see the difference between magic tricks and miracles. For instance, I have here a deck of cards ... and now, with nothing up my sleeve, let me show you a trick or two.

Insert card tricks here

Well, there's nothing miraculous about what I just did. Indeed, with my lack of ability, there was precious little magical about those tricks either. But you get the idea. For me to do something tricky with the cards is not a miracle. It has a rational explanation which is ... something I can't tell you or else it will spoil the trick. If we were at a party I could pull out a deck of cards and work my trick and entertain folk. Notice, though, that's not what Jesus did. He performed on the water jugs outside of view of all but the servants. He did not ask for anyone's attention and he did not use the water and wine thing to entertain. So there must have been something else at work here.

Indeed I think there is. This miracle was like every other miracle Jesus performed, a teasing moment. The miracles are all designed to teach something about God that mere words can not express nearly as well. Here Jesus taught his disciples a thing or two about God, and about his role in their lives. By taking something as ordinary as water and turning it into something extraordinary, into wine, and a good vintage at that, Jesus taught them a simple truth: God makes the ordinary into the extraordinary.

This had to be the first miracle Jesus performed. It makes perfect sense to me. Jesus teaches his followers in a way they would never forget that God's touch changes things. God has the power to transform. Yes, here it is only water and wine. Simple things, but things the disciples understood very well. Jesus would have messed it all up if he turned the water into omelette or into a vase of flowers. That would have been a mere trick. But here the value of the miracle is that it teaches us about God's power and God's plan. God is not powerless. He can change things, he can intervene in this world. And it is God's plan to change things for the better.

That's not only good news, it's comforting. Let me explain:

(1) Christians worship a God who has the power to intervene in this world. If God could not enter the world or effect things here in any way, there would be absolutely no reason to pray to God. He can't do anything. Really, a God with no power is no God at all. Why bother?

(2) God intervenes but does not interfere. Here's the difference: to interfere is to mess up the works. On the other hand, to intervene is to step in, especially when most needed, and move things to a better resolution. God does not show up and mess things up. God shows up to show us the truth.

(3) God intervenes in this world, certainly far less often than any of us wants, or prays for, but he does intervene in order to bring about his purpose for the world. It's slow going to be sure, partly because God works through willing hearts and hands more often than through miracles. He'd prefer to work with us at partners than in spite of us.

These seem like simple enough concepts, but it's easy to lose sight of them when you look closely at miracles. I'll be

reminding you of these things as we go along in this series. But for now, let me point out the one big deal for today. Miracles are not magic tricks. And you can nod your heads and say "Amen, brother" to that, but when times get tough you may quickly forget and go right back to asking God to do tricks for you. That can so easily happen in your prayers ... you pray for God to work a miracle for you, or for someone you love. Your prayer may be sincere, you may pray with everything you've got, but if you are praying for God to prove himself to you by doing a miracle, you're going to be disappointed. And if you are praying for God to interfere in your life, or in someone else's life, then as time drags on and you do not see miracles happening, you will no doubt start to wonder if God really can hear you or if he really cares about you.

You'll be missing the point that what you are praying for is not going to happen because it's not what God wants, it's only what you want.

So how do we pray? Is it wrong to ask God to heal your wife of cancer? Nope. Is it wrong to ask God to

help you find a new job. No. Or can you pray that someone else loves you as much as you love them? Sure, only remember God is not a genie in a bottle. He doesn't grant wishes. When he works miracles he intervenes in order to bring about what his purpose. And no matter how hard you pray about a job or a love, you may need to accept that God may not answer your prayer because you're praying for the wrong thing. I've done that many times ... prayed for the wrong things. Years later I realize I am so very very thankful God never agreed to grant me my desires of the moment. He had better things in mind.

So often God's purpose is tied in with what we learn in today's lesson: God transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. The miracle of God is to change things in unexpected ways.

So for instance, there you are praying that God would end your loneliness, and that he would bring you someone to love you and spend the rest of his or her life with you. And you wouldn't mind, God, as long as you were bringing that person along, if he could be a real hunk or she could be a babe. Only here again, your prayer has become a request for God to do a trick, when God is more apt to do is a miracle ... to touch your life and change you on the inside. You may pray to find Mr Right, the love of your life, while God is ready and willing to help you become a more loving person ... so you become the right person someone else has been looking for. Instead of changing things out there, and doing a trick or two, God is ready to touch and change you.

So what if instead of praying for everything around you to be different, you all prayed for God to touch you and change you.

By taking something as ordinary as water and turning it into something extraordinary, into wine, and a good vintage at that, Jesus taught them a simple truth: God makes the ordinary into the extraordinary.

You know, that would also be a miracle. And it would be more in line with God's purposes, you know?

Here's how the Bible explains it:

Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:16-18

When you ... recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone, and when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting religion of rules and rituals becomes obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! There ends up being nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transformed much like Jesus was, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

(The Message)

Once you realize God is real ... you see he has the power to intervene and to change lives in this world. And when you see God is personally present, a living spirit, then as the reading says, religion disappears and what you have left is a relationship with God. You can be free from rituals and rules and religion, because there is nothing standing between you and God any more, nothing blocking your way to God except your own bad choices that is. But even there, even as a sinful person who can not always choose the right or love others or forgive fully as you have been forgiven by God ... well, even there God has a plan for you. God is willing and able to transform your life, gradually, making you brighter and more beautiful as God becomes more and more a part of your life. You can be transformed. Me too. And if that isn't a miracle I don't know what is. Just one touch and God can change something as ordinary as my life, and my wants, my talents and my desires, and yes, even my sins, into something brighter and more beautiful. You know long before I ask for God to work any miracles out there, I'm going to start right here, and ask God not for a trick or for proof, but for the impossible ... to make my heart and mind more like his.

With everything I can and cannot know
This mystery is bringing life to me
And all this love I have for you I can't contain
I know I'll never be the same
You're everything I cannot see,
you're everything I cannot say

I know it all seems so illogical, but God that's okay

Solo: Everything Impossible

words and music recorded by mercyme

I was taught to be practical in everything I do
Holding on to what is tangible, and then came you
That's when I found myself so far away, from everything I
knew

I took a leap of faith
Even though you're difficult for me to explain I know I'll never
be the same

You're everything I cannot see, you're everything I cannot
say

I know it all seems so illogical, but that's okay
You're the love you give to me, you're the love I give away
You are everything impossible... And that's okay. That's
okay!

All the things that make no sense to me, draw me to you
Like finding freedom by surrendering, can it be true
With everything I can and cannot know this mystery is
bringing life to me

And all this love I have for you I can't contain I know I'll never
be the same

You're everything I cannot see, you're everything I cannot
say

I know it all seems so illogical, but that's okay
You're the love you give to me, you're the love I give away
You are everything impossible... And that's okay. That's
okay!

What's so hard to understand, what I cannot comprehend
Is that you love me the way I am