

WHEN MIRACLES DON'T HAPPEN

(John 11:1-53)

Why don't we get a miracle every time we ask for one?

What is a *miracle*?

- OED—a marvelous event not ascribable to human or natural agency, and therefore attributed to the intervention of a supernatural agent, especially (in Christian belief) God
- Broadly—any wonderful thing that happens by the power of God and is the work of God, e.g. healing, birth, answered prayer, good outcome
- Technically—a supernatural action performed seemingly above and beyond the laws of nature, usually to authenticate divine revelation

Scripture affirms:

- **Miracles have happened and do happen**, but what if our definitions are inadequate?
- **Miracles are rare**, but what if they weren't?
- **Miracles don't always produce faith**, but what do they reveal?

What One Miracle Revealed (John 11:1-53)

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (25-26)

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation...." So, from that day on they plotted to take his life. (47-48, 53)

Jesus doesn't always offer answers, but he always offers himself...

QUOTES OF NOTE

I have never found any philosophical grounds for the universal negative proposition that miracles do not happen. (C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*)

There is no foundation in Scripture, in reason or in the very nature of things why any or all of these types of experience might not be used by God today.... Of course, at any time there may be some degree of fakery and confusion, well intended or not. But such a blank denial has no scriptural foundation. (Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*)

Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly 'natural' things in a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded. (Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*)

The atmosphere I grew up in was humid with miracles. Most Sundays people in our church would testify about marvelous answers to prayer they had received the preceding week. God found parking places for mothers who drove their children to the doctor. Lost fountain pens mysteriously reappeared. Tumors shrank away the day before scheduled surgery. In those days, I envisioned Jesus as the Great Magician and, fittingly, the story of his walking on water especially impressed me. If only I could pull off such a stunt in my school, just once! How I would love to fly through the room like an angel, silencing with levitation all who scoffed at me and other religious types. How I would love to walk unscathed through the bullies at the bus stop, as Jesus had walked through an angry crowd in his hometown. I never managed to fly through the class room, though, and bullies continued to torment me no matter how hard I prayed. Even the "answers to prayer" confused me. Sometimes, after all, parking places did not open up and fountain pens stayed lost. Sometimes church people lost their jobs. Sometimes they died. A great shadow darkened my own life: my father had died of polio just after my first birthday, despite a round-the-clock prayer vigil involving hundreds of dedicated Christians. Where was God then? I have spent much of my adult life coming to terms with questions first stirred up during my youth. Prayer, I have found, does not work like a vending machine: insert request, receive answer. Miracles are just that, miracles, not "ordinaries" common to daily experience. (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*)

Miracles are a lot more problematic than most people realize. If God grants one, we expect two, and if two, two million. So, miracles would need to be pretty carefully dispensed, which is generally what you find in the Bible, actually. Miracles aren't all that common, but we talk about them a lot, so they seem more common than they really are—like shark attacks or tornados that keep getting broadcast on TV, just because they're so rare, giving us the impression that they occur far more often than they actually do. (Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*)

Although faith may produce miracles, miracles do not necessarily produce faith. (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*)

When Jesus was brought to the place where his friend Lazarus lay dead...he did not offer any solution. He only wept. Then the other things he said and did. But first he simply let his tears be his word.... God himself does not give answers. He gives himself. (Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*)