

Expecting Miracles

By David Feddes

One of the striking things about Jesus is the mighty miracles that he did, and we want to focus today on those miracles and what that means for us today.

"Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan followed him" (Matthew 4:23–25).

Jesus went around "healing every disease and every affliction among the people." When you read that, it's very striking, but it also raises the question: What about today? Should we expect the kinds of miracles from Jesus today that he did in the time that we read about in the Bible?

You might say, "That's easy. Of course we should expect miracles. I've seen people who were super sick and almost beyond hope, and then they got better again. I've seen times where it looked like things were very grim, but people prayed and God answered."

But I'm not asking now whether God answers prayer. He does. And I'm not asking whether there are some amazing reversals that can ultimately be credited to God. There are. The question is: does Jesus do miracles today the way he did them during his time on earth?

Jesus' healings

- Healed all who asked
- Right away, not later
- Instant, not gradual
- Complete, not partial
- Miraculous, not medical

When we look at the miracles that Jesus did during his time on earth, there are a number of things that we can notice about them. One is simply this: he healed everybody who asked him. Do you know anybody in the gospel accounts of Jesus who went to him and said, "Lord, I have this terrible illness or this terrible problem. Please help me," and Jesus said no? He healed them all—everybody who asked.

And when he healed them, it happened right away. You didn't have to recruit 50 of your friends to say, "We need to storm the gates of heaven. We need to pray hard, and maybe if we keep it up and do it long enough, then the Lord will hear our prayer and answer." That doesn't seem to be how it went when Jesus did miracles. When someone came to him, he healed them on the spot, without further delay.

And when he healed, every miracle that we read about—except one—was instant, not gradual. There was one where there was a blind man, and Jesus put some mud on his eyes. Then he washed it off and said, “Now do you see?” And he says, “I see people like trees walking around.” He was seeing very dimly and vaguely. Then Jesus healed him the rest of the way. That's the only time we read of a two-stage miracle, and the two stages happened only a few minutes apart.

I think that was a case of Jesus doing a miracle as an acted parable, because right after that he says to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter confesses that he's the Messiah, the Son of God. But right after that, it's obvious that Peter doesn't know what kind of Messiah, because he's telling Jesus, “You shouldn't suffer.” And then Jesus has to say, “Get behind me, Satan.” The disciples have a kind of two-stage discovery process: one, discovering that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, but they're still seeing pretty vaguely, and then Jesus is going to have to show them the rest of what they need to learn. So I understand that particular two-stage healing to be a picture also of the condition of the disciples right at the time when Jesus did the healing.

But that two-stage miracle aside, I don't think there's another one like it in all of Jesus' miracles that we read about in the Bible. All of the rest were instant, not gradual.

In Jesus' healings during his time on earth, every healing was complete, not partial. You didn't have people feeling quite a bit better or seeing marked improvement. You had sight fully restored, hearing fully restored, speech fully restored, dead people fully raised back to life. You had a complete and not partial improvement.

And in all of these cases, the healing was without medical means—without the activities of a physician or a doctor or any kind of medication or assistance. Jesus did healings where, in some cases, the medications had all failed. He did it apart from and beyond all human intervention.

So you have the healings of Jesus, where everybody who asks receives a healing. They happen right away, instantly, completely, and miraculously, without any other kinds of interventions.

If I ask the question again, “Do miracles happen today?” then a lot of what we would regard as miracles and answers to prayer might not quite fit this description of the way that Jesus did his healings. Scripture speaks of Jesus “healing **every** disease and **every** affliction among the people” (Matthew 4:23). Here are some examples.

Peter's mother-in-law was sick and had a terrible fever. “So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up **at once** and began to wait on them” (Luke 4:39).

“A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ **Immediately** he was cleansed of his leprosy” (Matthew 8:2–3).

There were so many people wanting to see Jesus that a paralyzed man couldn't get to him. His friends had brought him and carried him there. They went up on the roof and tore a hole in the roof, then let him down in front of Jesus. “Jesus said to the paralyzed man, ‘I tell you, get up,

take your mat and go home.’ **Immediately** he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God” (Luke 5:24–25).

A woman had suffered from bleeding for years and years, and nothing would stop the bleeding. She had spent all her money on doctors and it hadn’t done any good. When Jesus was coming by, she thought, “If I just touch the hem of his garment, I’ll be made well.” So she inched her way through the crowd, got near Jesus, and touched the hem of his garment. “**Immediately** her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering” (Mark 5:29).

After Jesus healed that woman, he went to a room where a sick girl had died. “He took her by the hand and said, ‘My child, get up!’ Her spirit returned, and **immediately** she stood up” (Luke 8:54–55).

Another time, there was a woman who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. “When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.’ Then he put his hands on her, and **immediately** she straightened up and praised God” (Luke 13:12–13).

There was a blind man. “Jesus said to him, ‘Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.’ **Immediately** he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God” (Luke 18:42–43).

You see the word “immediately” over and over and over again. When somebody comes to Jesus and Jesus speaks a word, there is instant and total wellness. Here’s a quick review of what we’ve seen about Jesus’ healing during his time on earth.

- Healed all who asked
- Right away, not later
- Instant, not gradual
- Complete, not partial
- Miraculous, not medical

Expectations

- Do such miracles happen today?
- Should we seek such miracles today, or lower our expectations?
- Should we expect 100% miracles whenever faith is strong?
- Wrong expectations are harmful.

Should we expect that kind of healing activity from Jesus today? That’s a tough question. Some would say we shouldn’t really expect such miracles at all today. Others would say, “Well, we could maybe expect God to do them some of the time.” Some would say, “We should expect it all the time if only we have enough faith, because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. If he did it then, he’s going to do it now.” Whatever our answer to these questions is, there’s quite a lot at stake. So before exploring further how to answer the question, I want to give some examples of what’s at stake if we’re wrong on one side or the other.

Dangers of expecting too little

Let's say that we're wrong in not expecting miracles and not having enough desire and confidence that God is going to do mighty and amazing miracles. What's at stake when we expect too little?

We might rob ourselves of healings that could have happened if only we had believed and asked. We might rob others of healing they could have received if only we had been open to God's mighty miracles, rather than proceeding as though that kind of stuff never happens.

We might rob God of glory that would have been his, if only we had been open to the mighty thing that he was prepared to do, if only we were prepared to believe it. The Holy Spirit gives gifts of healings and miracles—are we quenching the Spirit if we no longer believe in miracles and gifts of healings?

We might deprive the church of some of its power and potential for witness. We might weaken the gospel witness when it's not accompanied by signs and wonders as it was in the ministry of Jesus and as it was in the ministry of the apostles. In a secular age where so many don't believe in the supernatural, if God was prepared to do the supernatural, it would accomplish a lot more than any arguments about the existence of God that we trot out and all the other kinds of intellectual endeavors we try to use to persuade atheists. What if God just showed up and did some stuff that nobody could deny if he did it right under their nose?

Those are some of the things that are at stake if God were prepared to do such miracles and we're not open to them. Another thing that might be at stake is this: low expectation of miracles seems to widen the gap between our own time and experience and what we read about in the Bible. Somehow we feel uneasy saying of the Bible, "That was then, this is now." Intuitively we sense that the Bible is going to be the most meaningful for us if now is a lot like back then," rather than saying, "There are vast differences between God's activities in Jesus' time and ours."

So there is quite a bit at stake if we come at it with not high enough expectations, when in fact God intended greater things in the realm of miracles than we're open to or expecting.

Dangers of expecting too much

There is also a lot at stake if you over-expect, if you are expecting miracles and God has not promised them, or if the miracle is not forthcoming. What could go wrong with the view that God always does miracles if you have enough faith, and that he will always restore if you believe he will?

What happens when you don't get better? Then God didn't come through, and you blame God. You might even start wondering, "If the God I believed in didn't come through liked I believed he would, is there a God at all?" There are people whose faith has been shaken, if not shattered, by believing God would do something but he didn't do it.

And if you don't blame God, how about blaming yourself? That's another downside of the idea that God always heals if you have enough faith. You say, "Since the healing didn't happen, it's obvious that I didn't have enough faith, or that somebody close to me didn't have enough faith."

I know a person who was paralyzed in a terrible accident. Her son kept insisting that they needed to keep praying that she would be able to walk again and be restored. The months went by and she didn't get better, and her son decided that she must not have enough faith. It went on and on like that. The son ended up very seriously mentally ill, and his mother remained paralyzed.

The idea that always God is going to come through if you have enough faith means that oftentimes there is blaming of God or blaming of self or blaming of somebody nearby. That can be a consequence of having a wrong idea about miracles.

Another approach is to shun medical treatment because you're quite sure that God is going to make you better apart from all medical treatment. I've seen people refuse any medical intervention because they strongly believed God would heal them, and they died. What if God wanted to use ordinary means rather than a miraculous healing to bring about your restoration? There are serious, even fatal, consequences if you believe that a miracle is going to happen when you should be using less miraculous medical help.

There's also the danger of counting on a miracle to undo lack of responsible behavior. "Now that I've been a chain smoker for 40 years, I'm going to count on a miracle to get rid of my emphysema or my lung cancer." Or, "I'm very overweight, but I'm going to count on a miracle to undo my high blood pressure and vulnerability to stroke that comes with obesity." I don't want to imply that God never heals anybody if they're to blame for their own health problem. Still, it's dangerous to think that you can ignore ordinary wisdom for good health and then expect a miracle to undo the damage.

So counting on miracles and doing so inappropriately can lead to irresponsible behavior or lack of behavior. The Bible tells about more than just Jesus' healing miracles. There were also feeding miracles. Would you count on Jesus to give you a miracle meal every day? If you were to say, "I'm not going to buy any groceries this week because Jesus is going to furnish my table. After all, he fed the five thousand with a few loaves of bread, so maybe I'll buy just one bun this week and watch it multiply," that would be similar to saying, "I'm going to count on good health and healing by not taking care of my body and by not accepting any medical help."

Another danger can arise when people are at the verge of death, but they're not willing to face it or even to talk about it with dear ones. They won't accept the reality that death is near or make the decisions that should be made. A person who is terminally ill and about to die might be sure that a miracle is coming, so they consider it a betrayal of faith to talk about the possibility of their dying.

Or a loved one has somebody that they care about on life support, and they happen to believe very strongly in miracles. They might say, "It would be a lack of faith to detach them from life support, because we still believe that God is going to come through and heal. The moment we

remove life support, we're giving up on this person. We're giving up on God and his promise to do miracle.”

Those are just some of the examples of how an inappropriately high confidence or dependence on miracles can block us from making wise decisions in the circumstances that we're living in.

So there's a lot at stake when our expectations are off, whether too low or too high. If our expectations are lower than God has promised, that would involve serious consequences. But if our expectations are higher what God has promised (in this life at least), then we could be making some harmful mistakes.

Let's back up, take a deep breath, and ask: what's involved when God is in action? Because sometimes we tend to think of God being in action only when an undeniable supernatural, instant intervention has taken place—that's a miracle. But what about God's action more broadly?

God in action

- **Providence:** hidden plan governs created patterns and second causes
- **Answers:** interacts with prayers
- **Miracles:** direct divine action
- **All for his glory and our good**

One area where God is in action is: everywhere! He governs all things by the purpose of his will. He has a hidden plan that governs all created patterns and all second causes. By second causes, I mean when people do something that causes it, or when patterns in creation unfold in a certain way and God is not directly doing it—he does it in a more hidden way through various agents or the means that he uses. The Bible teaches that God works all things for the good of those who love him, who've been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). He works all things for the good of his people and for his own glory. And so it would be a great error to say that only when there is an obvious miracle is God at work. We need eyes to see God at work in all the areas that he is at work, because every heartbeat, every sunrise is from God. It's not just when a heart stops beating and Jesus says, “Lazarus, come forth,” that God has done something. When your heart kept beating, it was God at work too. So we need to understand that God is in action in all things: in all the provisions that are in our world and in all the functioning of our own bodies—in all the ways that he takes care of his people.

Another area in which God is in action is where he interacts with us personally—where we're talking to him as persons and directing our personal requests to him—and he gives answers. He answers prayers, and the world is different because of the prayers that he answers. “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). Prayer has an impact. It might be in a pretty obvious way, where we see something happen that we're pretty sure couldn't have happened if we hadn't asked for it. You might find that a lot more "God moments" happen when you're praying that don't seem to happen when you're not praying. Others might write these things off as coincidences, but your reply is simple: "I seem to have a lot more good coincidences when I've asked God for them." So there are things that God does in answering

prayers, and they may take on the appearance of a miracle, or they may just be him working through ordinary means. But they came because we asked.

And then there are the kinds of things we've read of Jesus doing—those direct divine actions, those interventions.

I want to highlight these three different manners in which God does things. And I'll take one example to illustrate them: pregnancy.

The virgin Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit through a direct miracle, without any father being involved. That was a tremendous miracle. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was in her nineties when she became pregnant. Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist) became pregnant long after her childbearing years were over. These two very old women became pregnant by a miracle of God. The virgin conception of Jesus (son of Mary), or the conception of Isaac (the son of Sarah), or of John the Baptist (the son of Elizabeth)—those were miraculous.

Here's an example that is in between a miracle and a more ordinary conception. Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau, the twin boys, couldn't have a child. She struggled with infertility. Her husband Isaac prayed for her. The Bible says he prayed for Rebecca, and the Lord opened her womb. Now that wasn't a miracle quite in the same sense as the virgin birth, or even as the conception of John the Baptist or of Isaac from Sarah, because Rebecca was still of childbearing years. Isaac and Rebekah were "trying" for a baby, but no baby was conceived. Then Isaac prayed, and something did happen.

So you see different kinds of pregnancy. There's miraculous pregnancy, in the cases of a virgin and some extremely old women. There's unlikely pregnancy in a difficult situation of infertility where God answers prayer and a baby is conceived by a couple of child-bearing age.

And then there's the third and most common type of pregnancy which has happened billions of times in God's providence, where children are conceived by sexual intercourse even when there are no specific prayers or miracles. Is God uninvolved when a pregnancy occurs in the most common way? What does the Bible say? "You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:13–14).

Now, which babies did God make? Did he create the baby Jesus in the womb of Mary? Of course he did. Did he make it possible even for elderly people beyond childbearing to have babies? Yes he did—those were miracles. Did he answer Isaac's prayers for Rebecca? Yes he did, and twins were born. But it's also true that every other baby that has ever been conceived is created by God in his image. That's what the Bible teaches us. So we would be mistaken to think that only those who are born of a virgin or of someone past childbearing years would be somebody created by God. All pregnancies are from God; all babies are created by God.

God's action sometimes takes the form of a miracle. But God's action, even when we don't see a miracle, is still God's action. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, "God in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure."

We sometimes talk about "the laws of nature." We should ban that phrase from our vocabulary because it fools us. It tricks us. It may not be sinful in itself to use that phrase if you understand what you're talking about, but it has so many detrimental impacts on the way we think. We should perhaps, instead of calling them "the laws of nature," talk about "the patterns of providence" or "the structures of creation." There are patterns of providence that we can detect and that seem to hold most of the time. It's God's usual way of doing things in the way that he's structured the things he's created. But those are not laws. The moment you start saying "laws of nature," you are suggesting, "God couldn't do this because he's got to obey the laws of nature." Don't import that word "law" into the whole discussion. A "law of nature" is not a law that limits God; it's just a standing pattern that God has made.

In his ordinary providence, God makes use of means, but he's free to work without them. He's free to work above them. He's free to work against them. He can stack up the waters of the Red Sea. He can turn a few loaves into enough to feed five thousand. He can do whatever he wants. That's what the Westminster Confession is saying here: God normally works through his providence and through his created providential patterns, but they're not the laws of nature that have God chained somehow. God is free to do whatever he pleases.

Facing facts

- ALL God's acts deserve our praise.
- Biblical miracles were special.
- We live between Jesus' comings.
- We have Spirit as down payment.
- Miracles are possible, not promised.
- We don't always know how to pray.
- Faith trusts God to do what is best.

What are some of the facts, then, that we face when we're thinking about miracles and what to expect when it comes to miracles?

First, **all God's acts deserve our praise**—the things that God does through his providence and ongoing works of creation, and not just the ones that happen to startle us by their suddenness and by being a miraculous intervention. It's a mistake to praise God only when he feeds the five thousand with five loaves of bread. He fed you this morning. The Bible says in Psalm 104 that God gives "wine that gladdens the heart of man" and "bread that sustains his heart (Psalm 104:14–15). God always does that. God does that for billions of people all around the world each day.

If you were there at the miracle of Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine, you might say, "What a miracle!" And the Bible does say the people praised God. Do you want to now pause to praise God a moment for all the vineyards around the world that turn water into grapes and then into wine for billions of people, or just for that little bit of instant wine that took care of one wedding celebration?

Do you want to praise Jesus for feeding the five thousand with a few loaves of bread and fish, or do you also want to praise him for the fact that when farmers plant a little grain into the ground, it comes up and multiplies into vast amounts of grain that becomes bread for people all over the place? Praise God for all the orchards that are there. We should praise God for the miracles, but we should also praise him for all that he does in creation.

You say, “Wow, it was wonderful when Jesus said to a terrible storm, ‘Be still.’” You're right: it was wonderful. But how do you think every storm stops? Why do you think the rainbow appears in the sky? Because God promised he would stop every storm before destroying the whole earth again with a flood. Nowadays, of course, the rainbow is terribly misused by some people. But let the rainbow remind you that God says, “I'm the one who stops every storm before it destroys everybody.”

So we can think of God's blessings in bringing storms or stopping them. We can think of the way that everything we look at is a marvel. When something good happens so often, we start to take it for granted or get bored. If it happened only once, we'd say, “Whoa, I can't believe it!” The difference between God's ordinary providence and miracles is largely that the miracles happen less frequently. The other things God does are just as astonishing, but they happen so often that we think they're “laws of nature

I had a conversation in Nigeria with a fellow Christian who was driving me around while as was visiting there. Where he lived, it was warm year-round. As we were talking, I said at one point, “Jesus wasn't the only one who walked on water. I've walked on water too. Where I live, it gets cold in the winter, the water gets hard on top, and I just walk right across it.” He didn't say, “Oh, come on. I don't believe that.” He said, “God is wonderful!” because he never seen a frozen lake or pond. Well, God *is* wonderful!

When we think about babies, we should praise God for the virgin birth and the miraculous birth of Jesus. We should praise God for every baby that he gives. We can praise God for the miraculous healings that he did in the time of Jesus, and for the wonderful answers to prayer and miraculous healings that he may do right now, but we really should praise him for our health—for the fact not only that he heals the blind, but that I can see, that I can hear, that I can talk, that I can walk. Because all of these are gifts of God that he doesn't give to everybody. Not everybody is blessed with the ability to have babies. Not everybody is blessed with the gift of sight. But if you are, thank God. And if you're not, thank God for other blessings that he gives.

The normal path to immortality is through death. Elijah was spared that. Enoch was spared that. At Jesus' second coming, Christians who are alive on earth will be spared that. But for most of us, we're going to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and we're going to receive immortality passing through death, as Jesus did. So we can praise God not just for the healings that postpone death, but also for the fact that he has a great healing in mind that is going to help us to triumph over death.

So we should give God praise for all of his acts. One purpose of miracles is to open our eyes to the fact that God is the one doing this all along. There are a lot of reasons for miracles, but one is simply this: when God does a miracle with bread, he's showing, “I, Jesus, am the one who gives

all bread, all food.” When he gives wine, “I’m the one who gives all wine.” When he heals in a striking and miraculous way, he’s saying, “I’m the one who heals all your diseases. I’m the one who does it all.” So miracles draw our attention to what God is constantly doing in what we would regard as less miraculous ways.

Another fact to face is that **biblical miracles were special**. I hope that my little survey of Jesus’ miracles did give some indication that Jesus is unique. There’s nobody with a 100 percent track record on miracles except Jesus. The apostles were able to do some mighty miracles, but not always when somebody asked them for help. Jesus could. Still, the apostles were able to do more miracles than anyone since that time.

The Bible says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). It should not surprise us if Jesus and his apostles could do miracles that are not so frequently or readily available today. The miracles showed Jesus to be God among us. The miracles supported the proclamation of the gospel and authenticated this gospel proclamation from Jesus and his apostles. So it's appropriate that we allow those miracles to have that purpose and say the Bible was given to us in testimony to Jesus and written by people who often had tremendous supernatural giftings from God to show that their message was the real deal, and that Jesus is the true and living God.

Now, the fact that those miracles were special, and that that was a unique era in some ways, does not mean that miracles never happen. So don’t jump to that conclusion just yet. But let’s give the uniqueness of Jesus its due. He did things that nobody else could do. He said things that nobody else said with the power that he said them.

Another fact we need to face is that **we live between Jesus’ comings**. When Jesus was here on earth during his first coming, he did a miracle for everybody who asked him, except those who said, “Quick, do a miracle to show us who you really are.” But if they just came to him with a need and said, “Lord, help me,” he helped them every time. However, Jesus is no longer here on earth in his body. Jesus will return, but that hasn’t happened yet. There is coming a time when every tear will be wiped away, when every disability is removed, when every eye will see with perfect clarity, when every ear will hear perfectly well, when the lame will leap. That day is not yet here.

We live between the two comings of Jesus. In the period between the two comings of Jesus, we need to recognize the uniqueness of that first time and the fact that we’re not yet at the second time. The coming of Jesus unleashed a different age, and a new power was at work in the world. But the Bible also says that creation groans, and we groan because that day of the full redemption of our bodies hasn’t yet come (Romans 8:22-23). So we live between Jesus’ comings, and that puts some limits on our notions that everything is going to be made right immediately. It’s not.

That’s why we need to keep praying, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus.” We may want to pray, “Lord, make everything perfectly spiffy in my life right now. Regardless of what happens to the rest of the world, I would like my life to be miraculously ideal.” But we’re taught to pray, “Thy kingdom come,” and to pray that he’s going to come again to make all things new.

Having said all that, the Bible says **we have the Spirit as a down payment**. That means at least two things. One is: we have the Spirit, and the Spirit gives powers to God's people and giftings to God's people in greater measure than before the coming of Jesus. Therefore, we should expect that there are going to be demonstrations and acts of God's power greater in our time than there may have been in the time before Jesus came—even though there were some miracles now and then in the Old Testament, of course. The mighty Spirit of God is living in his people. The Holy Spirit gives gifts of healings and the workings of miracles that are empowered by one and the same Spirit. And the Bible says, “Earnestly desire those spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:7–11; 14:1).

It's a little too easy to say, “That was them, this is now. Don't expect too much anymore.” Because we live in the time of the Holy Spirit. We live in a time when the Spirit's come on God's people in wonderful ways that surpass the time before Jesus.

Second, keep in mind that the Spirit's presence among us and within us is a down payment, not yet the full payment, not yet the fullness of a transformed world. The Bible often speaks of him as the down payment, which means we don't yet have the full, full gift of the Spirit that's going to make everything absolutely transformed when Christ comes again. But it's a pretty nice down payment, and a wonderful working of the Spirit that we can expect.

We ought to realize that miracles were not just limited to Jesus or the apostles. When you read in the New Testament, you read of the amazing miracles of Jesus and of the apostles. But Stephen and Philip were not apostles, and the Bible says they did miraculous signs. The church in Corinth was conducting itself without any apostles in the building, and God was doing miracles among them. Paul writes to the Galatian believers and says, “You see miracles among you” (Galatians 3:5), even when no apostle was there at the time. So there's evidence in the Bible itself that non-apostles and people who weren't Jesus had the power to do miracles in the church.

As for us, although we groan with creation, although we have the down payment and not yet the full gift of the Spirit, we do have the down payment. And so we should expect more than nothing. We'll put it that way. When the Bible speaks of gifts of healings and miracles, we shouldn't be shocked if God actually does some amazing healings beyond his ordinary providence, healings that we would not have expected, and other kinds of miracles that God is going to use to astonish people and advance his kingdom.

Miracles are possible, not promised. Mighty miracles are possible still today, but they are not promised in every circumstance. Therefore, I think it is a serious mistake to say, “100 percent of the time, if you have enough faith, God will come through.” That's not faithful to what the Bible says.

When you read the book of Acts, there's a wonderful story where Peter is rescued from jail miraculously. He doesn't have a planned jailbreak. It's not a bunch of the other apostles figuring out how to get him out or something. He's awaiting execution. He's chained to a bunch of guards. Then an angel comes into the cell. The chains fall off. The doors fly open. And Peter is led out. Only when the cold air of the street hits his face and he's out of the jail does he realize,

“Hey, the Lord just delivered me,” because he thought he was dreaming the whole thing. So he's surprised by it.

Then he gets to the church that's been praying for him, and they won't believe that he's out of jail. Peter is knocking at the door, and the girl runs back and tells them, “Peter's out there knocking.” They reply, “No way. Can't be Peter. It might be his ghost or his angel. Can't be Peter.” But it is. They prayed for Peter, but they were not exactly great champions of confidence that God was going to do it. Even when he did it, they didn't believe it at first. Why didn't they believe it? Because another apostle, James, had been arrested by Herod, and he had been executed. I'm sure they prayed for him just as much as they prayed for Peter. But God answered one way in relation to James and another way in relation to Peter. God did a miracle for one and not for the other.

You might wonder why God treated Peter better than James. But if you were to interview the two of them, you would find out that James got the easier path. Peter went on living, but he had to deal with lots of challenges and persecutions throughout a long ministry, and eventually he was killed. James died much sooner, was free of sufferings much sooner, and was with the Lord much sooner. But be that as it may, from our perspective, Peter got the miracle and James didn't.

Paul did many miracles. But he didn't always get what he asked for. Paul prayed to God for the removal of a thorn—some sort of affliction, even something that was being caused by Satan—and God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). God didn't give the healing that Paul asked, even though Paul was a miracle worker.

Paul had helpers and friends. The Bible speaks of Trophimus and Timothy. They both had ongoing health problems. These health problems were not removed by the miracles of Paul, who was undoubtedly a mighty miracle worker.

The New Testament clearly shows that miracles are possible: miracles of rescue, miracles of healing, other kinds of miracles. But miracles didn't happen all the time for people who were in a difficult situation.

Where does that leave us? You might say, “I've been listening to all this, and I am kind of confused.” Good! You're in good company. The apostle Paul talks about creation groaning and we believers groaning, and then he says, “We don't know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose... and that nothing—death or life or anything else in all creation—can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:26–28, 38–39).

So there are some things we don't know. We're not quite sure what to ask for today, because we don't know whether we should seek a miracle and keep on seeking it, or instead say, “God, thy will be done. I've asked. It seems you've given your response. Now help me to live by grace with the situation I continue to find myself in.” We don't have to have a perfectly clear

understanding, and our prayers don't have to always be perfectly on target, knowing exactly what God is going to give. There are situations where God gives a supernatural knowledge ahead of time of what he's about to do. And sometimes the Bible refers to that as the prayer of faith—knowing what God's going to do. But that's not always what happens. Very often, we won't know exactly how to pray. So we go to God with some of our confusions, with our desires, but with faith that God knows what he's doing. We don't always know exactly how to pray, but we pray anyway. We count on the Holy Spirit.

Then we **trust God to do what's best**. Sometimes God is going to answer by what we call the ordinary means of providence. Sometimes God is going to answer in more striking and impressive-to-us ways than that.

If we understood providence, we would be really, really, really impressed. Have you ever tried to run a whole universe? Think about it. What if you got everything you prayed for? You'd say, "Wahoo!" I'll phrase it differently: what if you got only what you prayed for? Did you pray for the gazillion cells in your body that are functioning every moment? Did you go to God with a detailed prayer about each cell: "Lord, please help my heart to do another beat, and Lord, another beat would be nice, and another beat... keep a few brain waves going, and keep the blood..."? If we depended on having a prayer for everything we needed, we'd be sunk. We cannot possibly keep up with what God gives by what we're able to ask. He gives so much more through his providence. It is wonderful that God listens to our prayers, that we can converse with him. But it is a tremendous blessing that God runs the show even apart from our input, because he has run our bodies, and he runs the world.

So we trust God to do what's best, to work all things for the good of those who love him. And we can trust God that if a miracle is appropriate, then let's be open to that possibility. He might do something that we hardly dared to expect or imagine. He is certainly able.

Expecting miracles

I want to end with this point, because I do believe that at the end of the day, we should be open to the possibility of miracles, and even be seeking that God would do more amazing things for us in our time. Not because we take providence for granted. Not because we're not grateful for other ways that he answers prayers. But because he is a God of miracles.

Asaph lived at a time when there weren't many miracles—in fact, not much good going on at all. It was a very discouraging time. So how did he deal with that? Among other things, he said, "I will remember your wonders of old" (Psalm 77:11). He said, "Okay, things look pretty grim right now. I'm going to think about how it used to be. There was a time when God brought his people through the Red Sea. There was a time when God fed his people manna. There was a time when God did these things. I'm going to remember your wonders of old." And then, before he's prayed much more, he says, "You are the God who works wonders" (Psalm 77:14). Notice he didn't say, "You are the God who *worked* wonders." He said, "You are the God who *works* wonders." He is the eternal God. He is now who he was earlier in history. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). And so, because he is the God who did miracles long ago, he is the God who still works wonders—because he's still here today. And he is still the God who

hears the prayers of his people. And he is the God who will do more than all we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

When you read the book of Acts, when the apostles were being persecuted, it's interesting that they did not ask God to bring down their enemies. They said, "Lord, consider their threats." That's all the instruction they gave God on that score: "Consider their threats; deal with them as you see fit. Then they prayed, "And now make us bold and stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:29–30). They prayed that things would be done in the name of Jesus so that Jesus would be glorified—so that many people who desperately needed Jesus and maybe weren't going to pay attention to God's other ways of helping and communicating might at least think of him if God got their attention in an astonishing way.

Brothers and sisters, God is still God. Jesus is still Jesus—the same yesterday, today, and forever. Nothing is impossible with God. We should pray realistically. I don't want to take back anything I said under those various points of being realistic. God won't always do what we want. But we still should pray expectantly, asking God to intervene in all the ways that are open to him and all the ways that we need him.

We live in a time when, among some people and in some parts of the world, there have been tremendous upsurges in God's miraculous activity. God is free to dispense those wonderful miracles as he sees fit. But let's not miss out on them simply for lack of belief or a lack of desire or lack of expectation, or rigid ideas about how God has to behave and how he can't behave.

Sometimes we're almost as bad as those people who talk about "the laws of nature" and then think God can't go beyond the laws of nature. People who are more Christian might not think God is bound by the laws of nature, but they think God is bound by the laws of their theology. They think they have the laws of theology figured out really well. They know exactly what God will do in our time, and exactly what he won't do in our time—because, well, they've figured all that out. Let's not do that. Let's be open to all that God will do in our own time and in our own place.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we do praise you for the wonders of your incarnation and of your walking among us. We praise you, Lord, that you did things that no mere man could ever do. By the power of the Holy Spirit and by your own divine Godhead, you worked wonders and performed miracles. We pray, Lord, that in our own time we may be open to all that you would do through your gifts of the Spirit and through the down payment of the Spirit in our lives.

We pray that we as individuals will glorify you for all of your works in creation and in providence, for all the ways that we've seen wonderful answers to prayer—things that can't be dismissed as coincidences, and even things that maybe would be dismissed as coincidences, but we know it was your hand. So we thank you for those. And at the same time, we thank you for ways that you've already intervened in many of our lives beyond what we could have expected, in supernatural and miraculous ways.

Lord, help us not just to have a hankering for the supernatural, but for your glory, for your church's growth and advance, for your power to be displayed among us in whatever ways you determine, so that our faith and the message we preach will not be just a matter of words, but of power. And so, Lord, give the miracle-working power. If it's going to bring healings or do other amazing things, Lord, bring that about. And we pray above all for the amazing miracle of new birth.

Lord, we ask that more people may be saved. We ask that our witness may be made more mighty and effective than it is. We pray, Lord, for your church in our time, which too often seems almost powerless against the attacks of the evil one and the trends of our age. May we not become discouraged or downhearted. But instead, Lord, may we be replenished each day by faith in your power.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Expecting Miracles

By David Feddes

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²³ Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (Matthew 4:23-25)

Jesus' healings

- Healed all who asked
- Right away, not later
- Instant, not gradual
- Complete, not partial
- Miraculous, not medical

... healing **every** disease and **every** affliction among the people. (Matt 4:23)

He bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up **at once** and began to wait on them. (Luke 4:39)

A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" **Immediately** he was cleansed of his leprosy. (Matt 8:2-3)

Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." **Immediately** he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. (Luke 5:25)

Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. (Mark 5:29)

He took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!" Her spirit returned, and **immediately** she stood up. (Luke 8:54-55)

A woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." ¹³ Then he put his hands on her, and **immediately** she straightened up and praised God. (Luke 13:11-13)

Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." **Immediately** he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. (Luke 18:42-43)

Jesus' healings

- Healed all who asked
- Right away, not later
- Instant, not gradual
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Expectations

- Do such miracles happen today?
- Should we seek such miracles today, or lower our expectations?
- Should we expect 100% miracles whenever faith is strong?
- Wrong expectations are harmful.

God in action

- **Providence:** hidden plan governs created patterns and second causes
- **Answers:** interacts with prayers
- **Miracles:** direct divine action
- **All for his glory and our good**

God is free

God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure. (Westminster Confession 5.3)

Facing facts

- ALL God's acts deserve our praise.
- Biblical miracles were special.
- We live between Jesus' comings.
- We have Spirit as down payment.
- Miracles are possible, not promised.
- We don't always know how to pray.
- Faith trusts God to do what is best.

Expecting miracles

I will remember your wonders of old... You are the God who works wonders. (Psalm 77:11, 14)

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (Acts 4:30)