**Foundations (37 of 60) Are Miracles for Today - RC Sproul**

Do miracles still occur today? Or did miracles cease once the New Testament was completed? That's the question we'll be taking up today on Renewing Your Mind. Some people are quick to call any unexpected event a miracle, while others deny the very possibility of miracles at all. So who's right? Should we still anticipate miracles from God? I'm Lee Webb.

Today on Renewing Your Mind, Dr. R.C. Sproul takes time to explain some of the issues surrounding this controversial topic. This lesson is titled, Are Miracles for Today? And it's part of a series called Foundations, an overview of systematic theology. Our teacher is the founder of Ligonier Ministries, a ministry dedicated to helping Christians understand what they believe, why they believe it, how to live it, and how to share it.

Here's Dr. Sproul. Before we go on to the next section of systematic theology and before we leave our brief overview of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, there remains one subject that I think we need to address because it also is so controversial and confusing. And it's an issue that's debated all the time in the life of the church today, and that is, should we as twentieth-century Christians expect miracles to be occurring in the life of the church today, or have miracles ceased at the end of the apostolic age? Now, so often that question is raised with respect and in conjunction with the whole discussion of the so-called miraculous gifts of the Spirit.

But in addition to that question, the corollary question that attends it as well is the question of, can Satan and his minions perform miracles? I would say that the majority report in the Christian church today, and at least in the evangelical world, is first of all that miracles do continue to exist in the life of the church, and two, Satan and his demons also have the power and ability to perform miracles. And those who hold the opposite view, which I include myself, are often vastly misunderstood on this point. And so I would like to take some time to explain some of the problems surrounding these matters and why historic secessionism has been the point of Orthodox Reformation thought.

We begin, first of all, with the first difficulty, and that is with the definition of a miracle. I find that people who talk about miracles don't always mean the same thing, and that particularly when a theologian is discussing miracles with a layperson, quite often they're two completely different things that are in view. And so the first thing we ask is, what is a miracle? Now, some people say that any answer to prayer, any divine operation that continues in this world today is a miracle.

Others argue that any supernatural work, such as the regeneration of the human soul, is a miracle. And some people even go so far as to say that anything amazing or fascinating, such as the birth of a baby, is a miracle. But in strict technical terms of definition, babies are born every day.

There's nothing extraordinary. There may be something wonderful and beauteous about the birth of a child, but it is quite ordinary. It happens all the time.

I don't know how many pastor's offices I've walked in and I've seen the sign on the wall, expect a miracle, as if miracles are something that we should expect as a commonplace, everyday occurrence in our life. And if that's the case, then miracles could be called ordinary rather than extraordinary. And yet the significance of miracles in the Scripture is found in their extraordinary character, not in their ordinary character.

Now, at the same time, there are periods in biblical history where there is a blaze of miracles, a huge flurry of miracles concentrated in a short period of time, namely the life of Jesus. Jesus' life was attended by an abundance of miracles. We see miracles frequently taking place in the life of Moses, and then later on in the life of Elijah.

But yet, for the vast majority of the time periods of the Old Testament, miracles were absent. They did not occur on a consistent daily, yearly, decadely basis, but there were concentrated moments, and I think we'll see why there were concentrated moments of this in a little while. Now, when we go to the question of miracle, the thing that many people aren't aware of is that the Bible doesn't have a word for miracle.

The word miracle does not occur in the Bible. Now, before you write me a letter or call me on the phone and pick up a various translation of the New Testament, particularly the NIV, that uses the term miracle frequently, let me let you know I'm fully aware that in the English translations of the Bible, the word miracle occurs frequently. But what I mean by this is that in the New Testament Greek, there is no one single word for miracle.

The idea of miracle, the concept of miracle that we study in theology is a concept or an idea that is extrapolated from the biblical record, particularly from the New Testament, from three different words. And those words are signs, powers, and wonders, because miracles, as we understand them, are manifestations of divine power. They inspire wonder or awe or amazement or astonishment at their occurrence, and they are significant.

John's favorite word for what we would call a miracle is the word symeion, which is translated by the English word sign. You read John's record, and for example, he'll say, this sign did Jesus at the wedding feast at Cana, or this sign did Jesus in Capernaum, or so on, and they were called signs. Now why are they called signs? Well, signs are something that point to something else beyond themselves.

They have what we call significance. They signify something. Now, here's the crux of the issue.

What was it that the so-called miracles or signs and powers and wonders of the New Testament were designed to signify? What did they point to? Obviously, they had important value in the very things that they did. Jesus satisfied the needs of the wedding host when He made wine out of the water, or He certainly met the needs of sick people when He healed them, or grieving parents when He raised their children from the dead. But what was the significance of those things? Well, I think to give an answer to that question, we first look at Nicodemus.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, he said to Him, good teacher, we know that you are a teacher sent from God, or you would not be able to do the things that you do. Now, what Nicodemus was saying is, you must be from God because we've seen the signs that you've performed. We've seen these extraordinary powers that you have manifested here.

So you must be sent from God. Now, Jesus Himself later said, you can't believe Me from My Word, believe Me because of the works that I do. Now, to see this in its full measure, we turn to the book of Hebrews, the second chapter where we have this admonition and warning, Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.

For if the words spoken through angels prove steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience receive the just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness with signs and wonders and various miracles? Now, here the author of Hebrews is saying that the truth of the Word of God, that which verifies that the message that is given by the writers of Scripture is indeed from God, is confirmed or demonstrated by God through their doing of miracles. Now that's a point that I think is often woefully neglected and overlooked, because here's the problem. If the Scripture says, we know that this is the Word of God because its authors have been authenticated and confirmed by miracles, and if then a non-agent of revelation can also perform miracles, what's the problem we have here? If the presence of miracles proves that somebody is sent from God, whereas an agent of revelation and a non-agent of revelation performs miracles, what does that do for the evidential value of the miracle for the one who claims to be an agent of revelation? It's an invalid argument.

If other people can do these things, then the fact that one person does them cannot prove anything about their authority or whether they have been sent as a spokesman for God. And so what's at stake in this issue is the authority of Christ, the authority of the Remember how miracles start in the Old Testament with Moses. Moses is called of God out of the burning bush to go to Pharaoh, and not only to go to Pharaoh, but also to go to the people of Israel and say, come with me, we're leaving.

And Moses staggers at this command and said, how am I going to know, how are they going to know that you have spoken to me? I can't just walk into Pharaoh's court and say, I was talking to this bush out in the wilderness, let my people go, nor am I going to go to these hundreds of thousands of Jewish slaves and say, let's get up and pack up our bags and go on a wildcat strike. Just because I told them that I have a vision, God says, put your hand in your shirt, and He did, pulls it out, and it's leprous. And He said, whoa, He said, put it back in your shirt, puts it back in, now it's whole.

And then He says, take your staff and throw it on the ground, and it turns into a snake. He says, grab ahold of it, He grabs hold of it, turns back into a stick. What's going on here? God is saying, I will confirm My Word by miracles, Moses.

That's how you will demonstrate that you are My spokesman and that I have commanded you to do these things. Now, this became an issue in the sixteenth century when the greatest, most fierce controversy about the nature and truth of the gospel broke out in the Christian world between the followers of Luther and the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church. The whole dispute was, what is the gospel? One of the arguments that Rome used against the Reformers was this.

They said, we have miracles in our history. And those miracles prove the truth of the Catholic Church. And they challenged Luther, and they challenged Calvin, saying, where are your miracles? How can you authenticate the truth of your claims if you have no miracles? Now, notice that the Reformers didn't say to their Roman critics, hey, listen, you're functioning with the wrong understanding of the significance of miracles.

They understood the significance of miracles. They said, we do have miracles that prove our teaching, and they are recorded in the New Testament. So, as we say, here is the authority, and the authority of the apostles is what has been proven by miracles, not by your phony miracles that you're claiming in your church.

Now, anybody can claim a miracle, but only one that God is proving to be His spokesman has that actual power to do it. That's why it's so serious in this day when you have people all over the place claiming to perform miracles. They'll even announce a miracle service.

They'll say in advance, you come on, we're going to do miracles. Are they apostles? Are they prophets? Well, if they're doing miracles in the biblical sense, we would have to conclude that their teachings are ratified, authenticated, and endorsed by God Himself, or that such works do not authenticate true apostolic teaching. And if that were the case, then the biblical claim to them would fall.

So, we have a real problem here. Well, the issue is this. As I said, what is a miracle? For this reason, theologians have been very careful to give a very tight, narrow definition for miracle.

And maybe it'll help us as we struggle with this to make the distinction between miracle in the narrow sense and miracle in the broad sense. If we mean by miracle in the broad sense God's ongoing supernatural activity in the life of His people, the answer to our prayers, the pouring out of His Spirit, the changing of souls, and all of that, we would say certainly that continues down to this day. If we define miracle in the narrow sense, such as the theologians have done with definitions like this, a miracle is an extraordinary work performed by the immediate power of God in the external perceivable world, which is an act against nature that only God can do, such as bringing life out of death or something out of nothing.

Now, most people who claim present-day miracles stop short of claiming the kind of miracles that we find in the Bible. I said most people because I've had people report that they are raising people from the dead and so on. But if you look at the so-called miracle workers in our culture today, has anyone documented somebody coming in whose leg has been amputated at the hip or at the knee, and with the laying on of hands and the prayer of the miracle worker, that limb has grown back? Don't talk to me about leg lengthening services in prayer meetings where somebody's leg is moved two inches.

That happens to me every time I go to the chiropractor. I'm saying you don't need a miracle for that. I'm saying a limb has been severed and it grows back on.

Now, somebody is dead, stone-cold dead, not just having cardiac arrest and is resuscitated, but somebody is stone-cold dead and that person is raised from the dead. Do you see that happening today? I don't think so. Not because God is not still on His throne, not because the Holy Spirit can't do it.

I certainly believe God did perform miracles and He can perform miracles. The question is not, can He or did He, the question is, is He doing this kind of miracle today? Is somebody coming along turning water into wine, making ax heads float, actually defying the laws of nature, the way Jesus and the apostles performed their miracles? I think you almost have to make some kind of a distinction here between the quality of miracles that are being claimed today by the miracle workers and the miracles that we find in Scripture. They are not the kinds of things that only God can do.

Now, the second part of this question has to do with satanic miracles. And again, I said the majority report in the evangelical world is that Satan can perform bona fide miracles. Now, why do the people say that? Well, because we're warned in Scripture against the crafty ploys of Satan, who performs lying signs and wonders.

We see the extraordinary actions that were done by the magicians of Egypt, for example, in their contest with Moses, and it's usually explained in terms of demonic power and influence over them. Well, here's the problem. If Satan can perform a bona fide miracle, then how do we know that the Bible is the Word of God, and how do we know that Jesus is the Son of God? Remember that in the Bible, miracles do not prove the existence of God.

God's existence is demonstrated other ways. What miracles do is prove the authentication and certification of God for someone. What does Paul say at Athens when he speaks to the Greek philosophers there, when he talks about the former days of ignorance that God had overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, come to Christ, because God has declared a day in which He will judge the world by that One whom He has confirmed by the resurrection of the dead? Here the apostle says that Christ is confirmed as the Son of God by His resurrection.

Well, what if Satan can do miracles? How do we know that the resurrection wasn't brought about by Satan? I mean, that's a terrible thing to even think of, I realize, but how do you know that? How do you know that it wasn't Satan who enabled Jesus to do all of the works that He did? Don't forget that that was exactly the accusation that the Pharisees made against Jesus, that He was doing these things by Beelzebub, by the power of Satan. Maybe Satan's greatest trick is to get people away from pure, unvarnished monotheism and direct them to idolatry by getting them to worship a man, and his greatest trick in getting them to worship a man was to give this man all kinds of powers to perform miracles and then to raise him from the dead. In other words, that the whole Christian church has been fabricated by Satan.

Why don't you believe that? Well, I don't believe it because I don't believe Satan is God, and I don't believe Satan can do things that only God can do. And I know that the Bible says that Satan can perform lying signs and wonders that if possible even to deceive the elect, but what is a lying sign and a lying wonder? Is it a true miracle, a true sign, or a true wonder that has been done in behalf of a lie, or is it a false wonder, a false sign? Not a bona fide authentic miracle, but rather a fake. Like we know that Satan's more sophisticated than any human being.

He doesn't have the power of creation. He doesn't have the power that only God has. He doesn't have the power over life and death and that sort of thing.

He doesn't have the power of the laws of nature, but he's more sophisticated than we are. And we see around us every day people making lots of money being very, very tricky magicians. The good news in our culture is that the famous magicians of our day don't claim to be doing miracles.

They make it clear that they're doing sleight of hand and that they're just skillful and adept in the things that they do. They don't really claim to be doing magic. In the ancient world that was different.

The magicians of antiquity claimed to have supernatural powers, claimed to be doing magic when all they were doing were tricks. And we see this in the contest between Moses and the magicians at Pharaoh's court. They brought all their bag of tricks to bear, but in a very short period of time they ran out and Moses kept going because Moses was not a magician.

He was one anointed by the power of God to do things that no magician can do. And like man, Satan can be very clever and deceive people, but don't give him the ability to do things that only God can do. He cannot do a real miracle in the narrow sense of the word.

Are miracles for today? That's the question before us on Renewing Your Mind with Dr. R.C. Sproul. And this represents just one study in the comprehensive 60-part series called Foundations, an Overview of Systematic Theology. We're pleased to say that we've collected all of the resources related to this hallmark series on Renewing Your Mind and packaged them into one set.

The resources include all 60 DVD messages from Dr. Sproul along with a CD-ROM that contains audio presentations and the printable study guide. In effect, this package of materials contains a comprehensive overview of systematic theology. When you give a donation to support the ministry, you're invited to request all of the DVDs along with the CD-ROM.

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The concept of grace may be familiar to us, but can we distinguish between common and special grace? It's one more occasion to further our education in systematic theology, coming up next weekend on Renewing Your Mind with R.C. Sproul.