Subject: Theology of the Miraculous (for embarrassed pentecostals everywhere!)
Posted by william on Mon, 12 Feb 2018 08:55:27 GMT
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I've been reading some of the old posts on the forum and it seems that there has been an unspoken lament (a few exceptions--Jman are you still around!<grin>) about the lack of visible, uncontested, plainly-evident, supernaturally miraculous phenomena in the present-day Church. To me this was kind of like the 'elephant in the room' that I found hard to reconcile with the NT pattern. So I decided to face this behemoth in my thoughts and the following post is the result. Don't be shy in picking it apart and offering a better, or at the very least a more cogent collection of thoughts on the subject!

So here is the new-and-improved --Theology of the Miraculous (for embarrassed pentecostals everywhere!)

Two distinctions from the Biblical perspective:

First --Visible, corporate, miracles from God our creator.

Things like the Creation in Gen.1; the Flood Gen.7, these would be the largest in scope.

Next would be miracles involving groups, like Israel in Egypt (12 plagues), then the parting of the Sea, the Cloud by day and Fire by night, the water from the rock, the quails, the manna... i.e. all of the miracles in the wilderness.

Later, as Israel took possession of their land there were miracles like the wall of Jericho, battle victories like the sun standing still, etc..

As time progressed and as Israel vacillated between belief and unbelief, there were isolated miracles like David's victory over Saul, Johnathan's exploits, then there are the notable mentions in Hebrews 11:32 --Gedeon's victory, Barak's and Samson's exploits, etc.. Elijah's miracles and the miracle of the return of the Jews after their exile (the proclamation from Cyrus concerning the return). Also the miracle surrounding Esther, i.e. salvation of the Jews from their scheduled destruction.

Secondly --Throughout all of this period we mustn't forget the many personal miracles. Besides those miracles that affected the whole world and latter those miracles that affected the whole corporate nation of Israel, there were the miracles that were personal in nature, like Elijah being fed by birds, the widow's son, and a whole slew of other significant events that came as a result of the prayers of the people of God. I can't make a big distinction here between the corporate and personal miracles of the Bible because of the fact that the 'small' miracles were recorded for us in the Scripture and thus inspired many others (in a corporate sense) even though the immediate

circumstances only affected those personally involved. But since our personal miraculous experiences aren't likely to be used to affect large portions of the population (i.e we aren't likely to be writing any more Scripture!<grin>) I believe that the distinction for our purposes is valid.

One such miracle is enough to illustrate this--the account of Jonah. It doesn't get more personal that this, yet a lot of people benefited from that miracle, i.e. the city of Nineveh, not to mention that Jesus used Jonah's example in a comparison with His own death, burial and resurrection.

I don't even know who wrote the book of Jonah but even though it is what we might consider the most personal of miracles, it highlights a point that I now want to make:

Miracles in the OT started off with the mightiest (worldwide in scope) and there was a steady decline to the personal type until Jonah which is a pretty good representation of one of the most personal of miracles.

Miracles started with a bang (no pun intended) and ended with an intensely personal experience of one man.

Now I am aware that Jonah in a strict chronological sense prophesied well before the exile but its place in the minor prophets along with it being the last (that I can find) recorded OT miracle makes it significant for this discussion, especially since it makes the point so nicely! <grin> But even if you search for another miracle, one that might qualify as the last chronological miracle on the timeline (I believe it is Daniel's deliverance from the Lion's Den), I think you will still agree with the tenor of my contention.

In fact, here is a link to a list of recorded miracles (beginning in Egypt) in the OT:

https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/parallel/paral12.cfm

As you look over the list you'll see that while there are some miracles that are considered 'greater' than others interspersed with the 'lesser' miracles, the overall trend is corporate to personal.

What has this to do with us?

Almost all of the NT miracles are of the personal nature, the healing of sick folks, casting out of demons, the occasional dead being raised. There are 37 miracles that Jesus did (I didn't count them, it's from another list given on a website:
https://www.thoughtco.com/miracles-of-jesus-700158), these miracles range from feeding the 5000 to one-on-one individual healings.

Compared to the OT range of miracles these NT miracles are much reduced in scale and scope and fall closer to the personal end of the continuum than great corporate deliverances; like the

parting of the Red Sea.

To round out the NT miracles here is a list from Acts:

https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/parallel/paral02.cfm

Almost all of these deal with individuals who are healed/delivered with two resurrections included.

We could say that the church corporately benefited (like Israel of old) from a lot of these miracles but nothing rose to the miraculous level of 'manna from heaven' or even the feeding of the 5000 by Jesus.

I think the last one was when Paul healed those in Malta. Acts 28:7-9

The NT letters to the Churches spoke of the gifts of healings, miracles, and other supernatural phenomena as being given to the people of God but even here we aren't told of what the gift of miracles entailed, only that it was given. As far as I know there isn't an example of a case of an actual miracle occurring (in the same vein as the larger OT variety) beyond Jesus' creation of wine from water, multiplication of food, walking on water, money in fish and of course the resurrection of the dead. Paul is credited with the resurrection of Eutychus in Acts 20:9-12 following after the example of Elijah but no parting of the sea or things like that.

We are told that the apostles did work miracles in Acts 5:12-16 but details of whether or not these miracles were something beyond healing and deliverance are not forthcoming.

Okay, I'm sure you all are wondering what the whole point of this is and whether or not I'm here trying to justify the lack of great miracles in our midst today in the 21st century. Well, here is my point:

We've all got notions about what the NT Church is supposed to look like and maybe I'm only doing this for myself but what I'd like to do is re-cap the evidence so that our expectations are in line with the Biblical pattern. If our expectation is that we should be seeing fire fall from heaven at our command then we are going to go around pretty frustrated at the lack of the miraculous and we possibly are candidates for deception in these end-times.

From the great miracles of the OT past to only personal victories like that of Jonah, (or Daniel in the lion's den) to almost 400 silent years between the testaments when seemingly nothing of the miraculous was happening. (Excepting those personal miracles that seem to follow believers and of course the miracle of the unfolding of Daniel's prophecy concerning the kingdoms of Greece and Rome and the typology of the antichrist... --maybe it wasn't so silent after all!)

Moving to the NT we have the non-miraculous ministry of John the Baptist kicking off the ministry

of Jesus who launched His Church with a plethora of miraculous healings/deliverances and a whole lot of personal miracles but none like those seen by God's hand in ancient times.

Next are the prophecies given to us in the book of Revelation.

Reading Revelation one gets the idea that God's mighty Hand is not shortened and the kind of miracles recorded early on will one day reappear on the scene. With the pattern we've been given and the prophecies that are to come we shouldn't worry too much that we aren't walking around right now as little Moses' doing great things-- Great miracles are going to happen again!

Is it any wonder that the world, almost exclusively, is caught up in uniformitarianism?

(Uniformitarianism, also known as the Doctrine of Uniformity, is the assumption that the same natural laws and processes that operate in the universe now have always operated in the universe in the past and apply everywhere. It refers to invariance in the principles underpinning science, such as the constancy of causality, or causation, throughout time, but it has also been used to describe invariance of physical laws through time and space. Though an unprovable postulate that cannot be verified using the scientific method, uniformitarianism has been a key first principle of virtually all fields of science.)

Is it not true that many Christians are just as convinced of this doctrine as the world (at least in the aspects that concern the miraculous)? Call them cessationists or whatever, they don't believe that God (or His Church) will do anything that could be construed as miraculous in the physical realm, personal miracles or otherwise. They don't necessarily deny that He did it in the past but for all practical purposes they are completely in agreement with the secular scientists on the topic of Divine intervention in the physical realm.

Enter the Antichrist.(Rev 13) It is said that in the end times the Beast and false prophet will do GREAT SIGNS and WONDERS and that the world will wonder after him. In this age where miracles are almost exclusively in the domain of the personal believer. (e.g. like when my son had stopped breathing and was brought back by God, or when my daughter and her dog flipped--some said multiple times--in her car and she came out without a scratch... both explained away by those unable to believe in the miraculous but firmly acknowledged by me to be miracles of God.) What is going to happen to the uniformitarianists and the Christian cessationist when the Antichrist performs verifiable miracles (calling down fire from heaven, etc.)?

An undeniable miracle will affect both uniformitarianists and cessationists to their core.

This might also have a great impact on those sincere believers, not aware of the pattern just described, who may see it as the long-awaited restoration of the miraculous to the Church.

Is this the reason for Jesus' warning in Matt.24:24 concerning the great deception? He said that if

it were possible even the elect would be deceived!

If our theology concerning the miraculous wasn't conditioned by what we read in Scripture, if our theology didn't include the possibility that there would be silent years with only personal miracles at times, if our theology didn't acknowledge that there would be this great deception (complete with corporate miracles) at the end, would we not be more apt to be deceived when presented with these great antichrist miracles after a long period of silence? Would we not jump at the first sign of a miracle and conclude that God was back in business?

I don't know all of the answers here but it seems that unless we see the patterns from Scripture that shows us plainly that great signs and wonders are not always going to characterize the times in which we live, we might be gullible to anyone who came along with a miraculous sign. Jesus told us to beware of those things.

Who's to say that any one would be deceived if the Church hadn't had this whole period of inactivity in the overtly miraculous. If, since the days of the apostles, the Church had been calling down fire from heaven, why would anyone follow after the Beast? Why would Jesus need to warn anyone about being deceived if miracles were commonplace?

Why indeed? Moses had the magicians who counterfeited many of his miracles and guess what? all but two individuals fell short in the wilderness. The presence of overt (plainly seen and verifiable) miracles in our midst since the Church was established might be as much of an hindrance as it was for the Israelites.

I know I'm sounding more like a cessationist than a Charismatic here, but isn't it possible that the lack of these types of miracles in the Church today is actually God's Plan? (Especially when we have the Scriptural pattern shown in the OT and the continuous personal miracles that deepen our relationship with Him each and every day?)

Just some thoughts to consider.

Blessings,
William