



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

The Theology of the Reformers

TRANSCRIPT

“Divine Providence, or What About Miracles?”

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the privilege and opportunity again of the study of Thy word. We thank Thee again for the assurance of divine providence, and we worship Thee and praise Thee for the benefits of it that have come to us, and not only to us individually, but to the whole of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we thank, Thee, Lord, that Thou art preserving us from the overthrow by the gates of hell and enabling us, ultimately, as a body of believers in Jesus Christ to reach Thy presence and enjoy all of the purposes that Thou hast for us throughout eternity.

We pray tonight that Thou wilt give us understanding as we think again of the ways in which Thou dost govern our universe of which we are a part. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Tonight, the subject is “Divine Providence, or What About Miracles?” And if you have your New Testaments, I'd like for you to turn with me to Matthew chapter 11 and let me read verse 2 through verse 6 as the passage from which we shall begin. Matthew chapter 11 verse 2 through verse 6,

“Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?”

Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.”

I'd like for you to notice simply this from this passage, that the miracles which our Lord appeals are designed to testify to the fact that he is the one who should come. John the Baptist has asked the question, Art Thou he that should come, or do we look for another?, and the Lord has answered by saying, Go and tell John the things that are happening. Tell him about the miracles. The miracles are the things that mark out the Messianic king who is to come.

Now turn over just a page or two and we'll read verse 25 through verse 30 of chapter 12, which also bears on the question in the same way. Matthew chapter 12 verse 25 through verse 30,

“And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand: And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house. He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.”

Now the key text in this passage is verse 28, where the Lord Jesus says, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.” So again, you

can see he appeals to the accomplishment of the miraculous as evidence of the fact that the kingdom of God has come to them in the person of the king.

Now you can see from just these passages that in our Lord’s mind, the miracles were not done simply to give evidence of the power of God, but they were given and performed by him with reference to a particular Messianic purpose. That is, the ultimate coming of the Messianic kingdom.

Now I’d like for you to turn to one more passage in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 12, and we shall read just one text here, one verse. 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 12. The apostle is speaking to the Corinthians and seeking to support the things that he has done in his ministry, and he says, 2 Corinthians 12:12,

“Truly, the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience in signs, wonders and mighty deeds.”

Now notice here the expression, “The signs of an apostle.” And he goes on to say that the signs of the apostles are signs, wonders and mighty deeds.

Miracles were the signs of the relationship of the apostles to our Lord. They were the signs that they were apostles, and they also were signs that in their ministry there was a connection between what they were saying and the kingdom of God that would come upon the earth. Notice that in all of these passages, the miracles are not simply done in order to display the power of God; they are done with purpose of revelation concerning the program of God down through the centuries.

Now let me begin with a brief review since it’s been several weeks we have studied together, a review of the two other messages just to make the major points that we have been stressing. We said in the opening message that providence is God’s work of preserving his creation, of cooperating in all that comes to pass, and of directing all things to their appointed end, so that the three elements in providence are, first of all,

God’s preservation of all things; secondly, his operation in all things, or his concurrence – and incidentally, I do not mean when we use the term, cooperation, that man starts something and God cooperates with man, but the reverse; rather, God starts and man is involved in what he is doing – and finally, his government of all things.

I said, remember, that John Wesley once said that he “Read the newspapers to see what God was doing in the world.” Providence is the work of God in preserving, in cooperation and in the government of all things.

Then, in the second message we stress that there is a general providence which cannot advance or slow down, and a special providence which pertains to individuals which we may not fully realize or know. As far as general providence is concerned, God is carrying out his purposes and it does not make a bit of difference what we may do about that. He is going to accomplish his ends. Bismarck said, “The statesmen cannot create the stream of time; he can only navigate upon it.” And in a sense, that is what we are. We are individuals who are living in a world in which God is accomplishing his purposes. And he is going to accomplish them.

Remember, Paul said, “He works all things according to the counsel of his own will.” Now that means that there is no surprise to God. Everything is proceeding according to his plan, and it will be fully fulfilled in just the way he has determined in ages past.

There is also an application of his providence to individuals, to groups, to a local church, for example. But that is his special providence, and it is distinct from his general providence, only in the sense that we can think of the two distinctively.

I gave the illustration of a person who was reading or trying to play a piece of orchestral music, having one of the instruments in his mouth, perhaps a flute, and never having played it before, never having looked at it before, it’s a constant surprise to him as he participates in the playing of that piece for the first time. Well, that is what we are doing, and consequently, we cannot fully know the things that God is doing in our life. It

is well for us to remember that. When the Bible says, all things work together for good to those that love him, to those that are called according to his purpose, we can rest upon that, but that does not mean that we know all of the things that are going to happen to us or that we understand the things that are happening to us at the present time.

Most of us have experience the truth that after things have happened, we have come to see them in an entirely different light, not understanding really why they were happening to us when they did. And I’m very glad of course that that is the case.

Many of us, if we could see into the future, would not want to look toward the future. Why I have a number of friends, if they had known what was going to happen over the past weekend, they might have committed suicide [laughter]. Last Monday was Black Sunday in Texas, and as matter of fact, the whole weekend was a black weekend for the State of Texas, with the Aggies losing, with the Texas Tech Red Raiders losing, and with the University of Texas losing. The Roman Catholics clearly outsmarted all of us. They came down here fifth in the poll, and by dint of an expression, an outburst of words that went on a week or ten days, convinced everybody that if they beat Texas they would be number one, and that’s exactly what happened. The bumper sticker looks as if it were right. God make Notre Dame number one – that’s what they said.

Now I must confess, it so upset me that I was thinking about abandoned the doctrine of grace [loud, sustained laughter] and going over to legalism and semi-Pelagianism and sacramentarianism, but as I look at it now, there obviously are some lessons. Sam Storms actually showed up, finally, today, after Oklahoma had lost. The ladies in the tape room were convinced that he would never show up today, but he did show up, and in a much humbler spirit, too [more loud laughter]. I haven’t seen my friends with the Longhorns, yet, but I know that they are in a much humbler spirit, too, and I must confess that I am also. I am amazed at what happened, and our only hope is

January the 15th.¹ Otherwise, 1978 will be a complete failure almost before we begin [more laughter].

Providence, turning back to the word of God – that was within the providence of God; oh if we had only known, if we had only known – providence, however may be ordinary with God working through second causes, according to the laws of nature. Or it may be extraordinary with God working immediately, without the mediation of second causes.

Now when we have providence in which God works immediately without the use of second causes, we call this “miraculous.” It results from the supernatural power of God. Now we have seen in the Bible itself cases of ordinary providence in which God accomplishes things through second causes. And then we have miraculous, mighty works of power in which things are accomplished, it would seem, immediately, without any second causes. We have, for example, the Exodus, which seems to be a mighty deliverance of God by which, apart from second causes he accomplishes the redemption of the Nation Israel.

All of this also brings up one other question, and that is the question of signs and miracles today. Does God, today, still work through signs and miracles? Are the strident claims of the Charismatics for faith healing valid? Or are they simply evidence of an impatience with the ruling God, who works according to his own blueprint? Later on in the message near the end of it, I want to deal with that question.

But now let’s look at the subject for tonight, and Roman I in the outline is The Nature of Miracles. And capital A, The Common Distinction in Providence.

Some scientists have seen different varieties of miracles. I opened up a book this afternoon in which a very well-known German scientist said that he saw four different varieties of miracles in holy Scripture. One, internal experiences in which God speaks in

¹ Dr. Johnson refers to Super Bowl XII, in which the Dallas Cowboys were to play.

the heart of a man by his word. You know the expressions in the words of the prophets come immediately to mind: “The word of the Lord came unto me, or the Lord said to me,” that kind of thing. That’s a miracle.

Then, this scientist claims (he’s a Christian scientist) that unusual events in inanimate nature were another type of miracle. For example, the Burning Bush, or Jericho and the destruction of the walls by the mighty power of God through the blowing of the trumpet. The sun standing still at Gibeon. Or Gideon’s fleece. These illustrations of the second type, the unusual event in animate nature.

And then third, he suggested that there were also miracles that could be called medical events. That is, the lame are healed, the blind are healed. And he himself felt that there might be some relationship between them and parapsychology. That’s not necessary for us to speak about that, but this would be a type of miracle.

And finally, he spoke of miracles touching the central creeds of the church such as the miracle of the resurrection or the miracle of the ascension or the miracle of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit or the miracle of the Virgin Birth. There are miracles that touch the redemptive program of God which he distinguished.

Now ordinarily, when we think about providence, we think of this common distinction of the ordinary providence and the extraordinary providence. Now let me just say one more word about that before we go along. There are these two kinds of providence; this is the common distinction that I’m referring to here when I say the common distinction in providence.

First, ordinary providence. God works here through second causes, like the common processes of nature. The growth of plants, the growth of animals. The orderly movement of the heavenly bodies. Earthquakes, for example. These are things that happen. They are the working of God because he works all things according to the counsel of his own will, but they are the workings of God through second causes.

Then, secondly, there is the extraordinary providence, and here God works in the external world by the simple volition, by the simple expression of his will. He determines that something shall take place. He says, or he thinks, or he simply wills that a certain thing come into existence, and it comes into existence. We could speak of his working in the eternal world, by the Spirit, in our regeneration, in our illumination, in all of the other spiritual blessings, because no subordinate cause is involved. He wills that a person be born again. Remember, James says, “By his own will – of his own will – he begat us with the word of truth.” So it is of his own will that he does things.

Now, we also I think have illustrations of this, and perhaps even better than that, in the original creation, in Genesis chapter 1, he simply said, “Let there be, and there was.” It was an expression of his will. Extraordinary providence, working in the external world by the simple expression of his divine will. When Lazarus was dead, and the Lord Jesus called out, Lazarus, come forth, there was no means involved other than the expression of the will of the second person of the Triune God. And Lazarus came forth. Jairus’ daughter, being healed, or the leper being healed, or our Lord walking on the water – all these are evidences of God’s extraordinary providence.

Abraham Kuyper – capital B – Abraham Kuyper had a rather interesting view concerning the relationship of miracles to the work of God. It was customary in Kuyper’s day, around the turn of the century, for Christian theologians to speak about miracles as occasional interventions of God in nature. But Abraham Kuyper contended that nature was never independent of God, and if we thought that miracles were occasional interventions of God in nature, we were saying, in effect, that nature generally speaking, was independent of God.

And with that, Professor Kuyper disagreed. He said, and he tried to make the point very plainly, that nature only exists by his word and all of nature – all parts of it – acts as the servant of God. Every part of this natural creation is a part of God’s work, and every piece of his creation is his servant. A miracle is simply the result of God’s will that

a certain thing occur differently than it had up to that moment had been willed by him to occur. So Kuyper said that when a miracle took place, it was not an intervention, an occasional intervention of God into the natural world, but it was simply the fact that on occasion he did his work in a different way. He always controlled all of nature. For God then, there is no such thing as miracle. It’s a miracle to us. It’s a new way of God’s rule over all things.

So according to Kuyper, his government is not an occasional or an atomistic affair in which he intervenes every now and then. That leads to the tendency, incidentally, to feel that if we have some particular outstanding answer to prayer, that we suddenly become more thankful about that one thing that has happened than all of the years of God’s fatherly care over us up to that time. It’s a rather strange thing, but we Christians do fall into that. We think, well, God finally answered one of my prayers last Tuesday, and we’re very thankful about that, forgetful that we have been here and he has preserved us down through all of these years. And that may have been some new way in which God has acted, but it is not in any different way. He cares for his saints all the time. His providence is always at work. So to think of a miracle as an occasional intervention of God in the natural world is, I think, a weakening kind of conception, and so I must say I agree with Abraham Kuyper in his analysis of the providence of God.

Well let me come now, secondly, to the possibility of miracles. Miracles are denied by those who do not see any distinction between God and nature. This is a very common scientific viewpoint, and let me say a word now about the scientific objection. This is capital A in the outline, Scientific Objection. I want to read a passage from a book in just a moment.

Scientists – not all of them, fortunately; perhaps more scientists are Christians today than every before – but many Christian scientists do not believe this, but it is a common scientific objection to say that miracles are a violation of the laws of nature. Sometimes you will have them say, Miracles are a violation of the immutable laws of

nature, as if the laws of nature are known by them to be immutable. That of course is a gratuitous assumption, and if a scientist does not realize that, he’s not thinking very plainly and clearly. It is a total assumption to say that the laws of nature of immutable.

Now there was a great deal of discussion over this point among modern theologians and scientists, and occasionally a man who came to the view that miracles were impossible followed out his convictions to their proper end. But most of the time what happened was that if the man was a Christian or rather a professing theologian or a minister in the church, he tended to deny the miraculous but stay in the church.

There was a man by the Allard Pierson, a Dutch man, and his response is the proper response for a person who came to feel that the laws of nature were immutable and that it is impossible for God to intervene in our natural world. This is a paragraph or two from G.C. Berkouwer’s book *The Providence of God* concerning Mr. Pierson. He writes, “Not everyone, however, was willing to accept the full consequences of this monistic view of the world. This was illustrated with particular clarity by Allard Pierson, the *enfant terrible* of modernism, one of the few who accepted the practical consequences of modern thought. He resigned his ministerial office saying that his rejection of supernaturalism made it impossible for him to work within the church without sacrificing his honesty and integrity. It was, he thought, impossible to construct a Christian theology on the modernistic assumption of a world closed to miracles.

“Pierson questioned whether modernism could honestly claim for itself the name of Christianity.” He was thinking straight. “He applied the consequences of modern thought particularly to the providence doctrine. If, he reasoned, everything must have a natural cause, man can no longer believe in divine intervention. Further, granted an uninterrupted natural dependence between all things and the absolute dominion of law of cause and effect, there can be no place for miracles, no hope for divine interference.

“The new theology taught that God never acted immediately, that all his acts were bound by the logical, mutual, interdependence of natural things. Pierson concluded,” this

is what he said, “Though it may be desirable to speak kind and pleasant words from the pulpit to attentive audiences, it is better to be silent when these words have meaning only in a world which is no longer and can no longer be ours.”

And then Mr. Berkouwer goes on to say, “Thus, compromise was unthinkable, and since prayer for a pure heart is as supernatural as prayer for a sound body, the logical and unavoidable climax was Pierson’s departure from the church.” That is true. If a person does not really believe in the miraculous and believes that we live in a world of cause and effect that is a total closed, physical continuum, and God cannot intervene, then of course we do not have, when we pray, any assurance of any intervention by God, and the whole Christian system becomes a farce. The thing to do if you believe that is to get out of the ministry. You should not stay in and use different terms seeking to lead astray the saints, even if you don’t realize that’s what you’re doing.

A man who did not have the honesty and integrity to do that – and I don’t question that he did not have some rationalizing support for his views – was a man by the name of Rudolph Bultmann with whom God was very longsuffering, allowing him to live 91 years. Nevertheless, Professor Bultmann who probably influenced modern preachers as much as any man in the 20th Century, did not believe even in the supernatural. Now he said it plainly. He said, “I presupposed that God never interferes in our natural world.” So by presupposition, he eliminated the supernatural. Miracles were superfluous, and superfluous because science had made us to understand why things were really happening.

Now it is true that many of the early Christians thought that God did a lot of things that scientists later discovered were the natural results of cause and effect. And after a number of scientific discoveries, and the gap between the reality, the natural reality and what happened according to Scripture was narrowed down and less and less was allowed for God, it became customary for people who ridiculed believers in miracles to call them “believers in the God of the gaps.” But the gaps were getting smaller and smaller, and

less and less was left for God. So, of course, that should teach us that we should listen to what science has to say when science does speak that which appears to be truth, but at the same time not abandon the word of God because the scientists had discovered some things.

Christian scientists have discovered a lot of things for us in the past; I hope of course that they discover a great deal more. Christians should never be afraid of the study of science, but rather should desire to study science. It was the custom, incidentally, for Christian theologians in the 19th and 18th and 17th Centuries to be students of science. They were the leading scientists of their day. And the idea of science and theology being opposed was something they could not understand, because they say all of the scientific world under the God of truth, the God of the Bible.

Christian explanations of miracles have been several. Augustine in his famous work *Concerning the City of God*, said that “Miracles were merely exceptions to nature as we know nature. If we fully understood nature,” Augustine claimed, “then we would not have miracle.”

That view, however, involved contraction, because the Bible does state that certain things happened. For example, it says that with five loaves and two little fishes, the multitude was fed. And according to this, according to this view, according to Augustine, if we really understood what happened, it wouldn’t be a miracle, well that would seem to contradict what John says, for example, in John chapter 6. So, Augustine did not carry too many with his explanation.

Then some other Christians have believed that miracles are simply above nature. That is, super-natural. That what *super* and *natura* means, that *natura* means “nature,” *super* is the Latin prefix which means “above,” so that supernatural means “above nature.” That is, God by his volition produces unusual effects.

I guess that most of the Christian theologians have believed that this is the explanation of the miraculous. God works, producing unusual effect by his volition.

They are unusual to us; they are not unusual to him. He does not say, Ah, look what I’ve done. I was surprised by that. But it is all in accordance with his volition.

Some, however, have suggested that perhaps miracles are contrary to nature. That is, the laws of nature are superseded by a higher manifestation of his will. The forces of nature are counteracted by a force superior to them. Now some have held to this view, but, it probably cannot be successfully supported. Incidentally, modern science has by virtue of quantum theory, Heisenberg’s principle and things like this, have now come to the realization that the determinacy of science is not so clear and definite as it used to be held.

Formally, modern science believed in a deterministic type of understanding of nature. But that is now gone. And many Christians have rejoiced in that because they’ve said, Ah, science itself has acknowledged that there is indeterminacy in nature, and therefore miracles may be possible. That only shows you how subservient they were to the idea that all things work according to natural law, and how they had been influenced by scientists. They didn’t have to be that influenced.

The biblical view is this. There is no antithesis between the activity of God and a self-contained world. All things lie, each instant, in God’s hand. His activity is not problematic. It is real, according to the Bible. There is nothing impossible with him. Over and over again the Bible states that. Is there anything impossible with God? No. So, he does not work contrary to nature, but he works according to his own will. And occasionally, he does his things in a new way. And we looking on from outside say, Ah, it’s a miracle.

Now let’s come to come to the purpose of the miracles, because this is really the most important part of this subject. The real significance of miracles is here. Capital A, to demonstrate God’s power. Well, I’ve already said in the beginning that miracles are not arbitrary expressions of the power of God. He does not do a miracle simply to let us know that he is powerful. He does not have to do that.

He does not produce a miracle in order to have men simply wonder at it. Now, some of the miracles that he performs are called “wonders.” In fact, the very term *teras* which means “wonder” is used. But the purpose of the miracle is not to provoke wonder on the part of the individual, simply.

The miracles of God have revelational significance. That’s the most important thing to remember about miracles; they are things that God has done to carry on his redemptive program. They have revelational significance.

Now when we look at the Old Testament and New Testament, we think of this as – to use a technical term which I’ll explain – *hausgeschichte*; that is, the history of salvation. The history of redemption. The Bible gives us the history of redemption. Miracles are related to God’s program of the ages; his history of redemption. So they’re not done simply to demonstrate his mighty power.

Capital B, The Are Performed to Instruct us Regarding the Kingdom Which is to Come. Now we read Matthew chapter 12 verse 25 through verse 30 where the Lord Jesus said, after that healing incident, in answer to the accusation that he had performed his miracles by means of Satan, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.” So, he said that the miraculous is the sign that the kingdom of God has come to them.

And when he answered John the Baptist’s emissaries and he said, Go and tell John that the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them, the lepers are cleansed and so on, that was an answer to let John know the signs of the kingdom were present in the king. So these signs are not primarily done against nature, but against sin. That is, against God’s program with reference to sin in the individual and in his creation, what someone has called “a redeeming reinstatement of the normality of world and life through the new dominion of God.”

We tend to look at a miracle and say, “A miracle is a surprising thing.” A leper is cleansed, or a blind man sees. A lame man is not only healed, but he leaps up and

down. We say “a mighty miracle.” But do you know why that’s a mighty miracle? Why it’s a mighty miracle because we live in a world of sin, curse and death. It’s not a mighty miracle to God; it is the expression of the life of God. These are simply adumbrations of the life of the future. It is the life of the kingdom of God in this present life. And these miracles then are not really to be looked at as marvels in our existence so much as they are anticipations of what lies before us. So, the miracle, then, should not be so surprising to us.

It is the expression of life restored through God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. Acts of God are designed to bring us to decision in order that we might respond in faith, but they are really designed, these miraculous things are designed to bring us to faith and assurance that God’s promises concerning the mighty kingdom are going to be fulfilled.

Let me read a passage or two now, and I’d like for you to turn with me to them. John chapter 20, verse 30 and 31. Now, John wrote his gospel with the idea that the Lord Jesus had performed mighty miracles which were designed to teach certain things. That’s the reason he called them “signs;” he didn’t call them wonders, but he called them signs. He called them miracles that were designed to teach a certain spiritual truth. Let’s see what they were designed to teach. Verse 30 of John chapter 20,

“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”

So you see, John says, I have given you the account of these signs which the Lord Jesus performed, these miracles, that you might believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in believing you might have life through his name. So, the signs then were given not to display the mighty power of God, simply, but to bring men to faith in the Son of God and in the possession of eternal life.

The evidence that this is the primary purpose of the miraculous is supported by the fact that the Lord Jesus did not heal promiscuously. He did not heal everybody. If miracles were simply given in order to show the mighty power of God, then why would he not have come and healed everybody? But he healed only certain people. Occasionally, he did heal all who came to him at a certain point, but even in Israel, in the little land in which he labored, he only healed certain people. He was trying to get over a message through the healing. Not to display his power, simply, but he was trying to point out that he the king in his ministry was anticipating his Messianic ministry that was to come, seeking to bring them to the place of conviction. He is a messenger of God, and thus, we ought to believe in him and in the program of which he is a part.

Now let me ask you to turn with me to Luke chapter 18 in order to show again that the miracles are designed to bring to faith in the Son. Incidentally – while you’re finding Luke 16 let me say this – there are people who think that the miracles were designed to bring men to faith of themselves. Now they were never designed to do that, because of course we need divine illumination to come to faith. They really were designed to identify a certain person as a divine messenger. They were to identify our Lord as the Messianic king that men might respond to his word. Miracles do not bring faith.

Let’s look here at Luke chapter 16, and I’ll begin at verse 29. You know the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Well, I guess I should start reading above,

“And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.”

And then, the rich man expresses what is such a common view among Christians: if we just had a miracle, we would believe.

“And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

You see, the miracles were not designed to shock people that the believed because of a miracle. But the miracles identified a certain person as a divine messenger so that they would listen to his word. And it is through his word and the Spirit that men come to faith in Christ. They need the operation of the Holy Spirit in illumination to see.

Men don’t come to faith by mighty works of power. So, miracles don’t decide anything, definitely. Now, we could talk more about that, but I want to close with a word concerning the purpose of miracles as the Bible reveals them, and I want to say a word about the past, and then the future, and then a word about the present.

In the past, miracles occurred at significant points in the history of redemption. Where was the first series of miracles performed? Well, most of you would know: in Egypt. They were performed by Moses. That series of miracles described for us in Exodus is the first significant series of the miraculous. What was God doing?

Well, he was accomplishing a redemptive purpose. He was bringing the Nation Israel out of Egypt. He performed these mighty works through Moses in order that the Children of Israel would recognize that Moses was the deliverer and would follow him. And as they came out, remember, the Bible says, “And they believed in the LORD and Moses.” So that Moses performed mighty miracles at a crucial point in the program of God.

Now when was the next outpouring of the miraculous? Well if you think through the Old Testament, you’ll remember that the next outpouring of the miraculous was in the day of Elijah and Elisha. Those two prophets who came on the scene again at a critical point in Israel’s history; Israel had backslidden, had apostatized, and the two prophets came on the scene and performed their mighty miracles in a divine attempt, looking at it from the human standpoint to bring the nation back to faith in the God Yahweh.

Then we do not read about any further pouring out of the miraculous until when? Well, when our Lord came on the scene. And when we read that our Lord Jesus came on the scene and began to preach, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” he began to travel all over the land of Palestine, “teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of diseases among the people,” Matthew 4:23 says.

Then our Lord’s ministry was continued by whom? Well, by the apostles. In fact, we could probably include them together: the Lord and the apostles. Paul said, remember in the text that we read for Scripture reading, “The signs of an apostle (a sent one) have been performed in your midst.” The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the same thing in chapter 2 verse 1 through verse 4. You might turn there. I think we have time to read it. Hebrews chapter 2 verse 1 through verse 4. The writer here explains one of the purposes of the miraculous. He says,

“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will?

So these miracles were signs of the coming kingdom, of the age that was to come. Notice the fifth verse,

“For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak.”

So at the critical points in the history of the world, the Lord has done his mighty works of power: in Moses’ day; in Elijah and Elisha’ day; in the day of our Lord and the apostles.

Now that is very important for us, because it shows us that God has a distinct purpose relative to the kingdom in the performance of his mighty works. They are signs of the accomplishment of his purposes of salvation.

What about the future? Well now, if you turn to the Book of Revelation, you have the most amazing series of the miraculous that you have in all of the Bible, for in the future, God will pour out a series of judgments from heaven; incidentally, if you study carefully the Book of Revelation, you will see that many of them are likened to the plagues in Egypt. They are in a sense the answers, the final answer to the message of judgment, and the final appeal of Heaven to turn to the king and the coming kingdom. So in Revelation, we have the outpouring of the trumpet judgments, the bowl judgments, the seal judgments – these are the mighty miracles of the future that do what? That announce that the kingdom is now at hand.

The fact that they are the greatest series the miracles the world has ever seen is evidence that the conclusion of the redemptive program is near at hand. Incidentally, Satan, seeking to counterfeit, as he sought to counterfeit through the magicians in Moses’ day will counterfeit in the latter days by the use of the False Prophet and the Antichrist who shall perform lying wonders. In fact, the very same terms that are used to describe

the Lord’s miracles are used to describe the Antichrist’s, except that they are “lying” miracles. So, it is Satan’s attempt to counterfeit the kingdom program.

Now what about the present? Does he still work by miracles? Now as far as I know, there is nothing in the Bible that says he could not work by miracles. In other words, I think it would be foolish for me to say to you, he cannot today perform miracles. No one – there cannot be today a resurrection from the dead. I don’t of any that has occurred, incidentally, since the days of the apostles. I rather expect that that is the intention of God, but I don’t know of any text that says it could not happen.

We know that in just the past ten or fifteen years there have been some unusual claims that came out of the East Indies, but after they were investigated by careful research, it was discovered that they were not miracles at all, although the Charismatics made a great deal of them for a while.

We of course have the claims of mighty works by the Roman Catholics, aside from what happened in the Cotton Bowl, the other afternoon. We have the claim by them that Lourdes’ ordinary water is able to heal, and it is supposed to be scientifically supported, because it was just ordinary water and there’s no other scientific explanation, so in the absence of any scientific explanation of how the ordinary water is able to heal, it must since it did heal be a miracle of God. We are very, very doubtful of the truth of that.

We do not, however, have any text that says that that could not happen. But, if the Bible is right in what it says, that is that the miracles are related to the redemptive program of God, the fulfillment of his plan and purpose through the ages to ultimately bring in the Messianic kingdom, it is a striking thing that faith healers today, as a general rule, make no connection whatsoever between their miracles and the kingdom. They are not sufficiently students of the Bible to understand that the miracles have to do with that kingdom program, and almost always, they simply advertise the miraculous as a means by which an individual may be delivered from some particular disease or some particular

weakness. In other words, their understanding is totally at variance with the understanding of the miracles according to the divine word.

Faith and prayer are thought to be able to determine God’s activity without assurance that the things requested are really serviceable for the kingdom of God. There is no universalism in the healings of the New Testament, and I am inclined to think that the claims of all who say that God is performing mighty works of healing today, all of these claims are simply illustrations of the impatience of men with the ruling activity of God.

If they were students of Scripture, and were able to show from the word of God how this fits in with his kingdom program, then I would be myself more amenable to their claims. In the absence of such, I cannot believe that what we have seen made as a claim by the Charismatics or the Roman Catholics or any of the other sects or organizations are really true.

In fact, it appears that from the time of the apostles we have no evidence whatsoever of any series of miracles being performed like the miracles of the Bible. That would indicate that it is God’s sovereign purpose, because he performs miracles when he wishes; not when we are ready. But when he wishes, he performs miracles. That would seem to indicate that it is not his will that such take place at the present time.

Next week, we will conclude our study of providence...[tape ends].