

The difference between miracle and magic

Exodus 7 - 10

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Have you ever prayed for a miracle? If not, why not?

Because you don't believe in miracles? Because you believe modern sensibilities have shown all claims of miracle to be no more than wishful thinking or fortunate coincidence, products of fanciful imagination or embellished memory?

Or have you been hesitant to pray for a miracle because you can't believe that your personal concerns warrant a miracle? Because God must have more important matters to attend to? Because you can't believe that you deserve a miracle? Because it is too much to ask, too much to expect?

Or have you chosen not to pray for a miracle because if you did and it didn't happen, you might lose your faith? Do you make sure that your faith stays within very carefully defined limits? Do you make sure you never put your faith to the test ... because you are afraid it might not pass?

These are all familiar and understandable objections, but why wouldn't you pray for a miracle?

If you did and you didn't get what you wanted when you wanted it, would that necessarily mean that God couldn't do it or that God didn't care? Would the fact that your prayer was not answered according to your schedule and your specifications necessarily prove that God is powerless or that God is not good or that God does not exist or all of the above? Is faith a matter of proof, of gauging God's ability to come through for me ... or is faith a matter of trust, of counting on God's wisdom and God's love?

And if you do trust in God's wisdom and love, then why not ask for whatever you want, whatever the outcome? Who says it's too much to ask? Who says it's too much to expect? Do you really believe that God metes out miracles based on merit? Would you want to believe in a God who passes out special favors as a reward for good behavior?

The most significant objection to praying for a miracle is, of course, the first -- miracles just don't happen. But, as a person of faith, before you can rest too easy with that conclusion, you will have to come to terms with the clear testimony of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, that miracles indeed do happen!

The descendants of Abraham needed a miracle. They were slaves in Egypt: powerless, completely crushed in body and in spirit, without dignity, without hope, without anyone to take up their cause. It would take a miracle to get them out of Egypt and out from under the thumb of Pharaoh! And, according to the story recorded in the book of Exodus, that is just what they got ... a miracle.

God sent Moses to Pharaoh to announce God's demand: *Let my people go!* And when Pharaoh refused to let the people go, God unleashed a series of awesome wonders, ten terrible plagues, signs of God's presence and power. Signs to the Egyptians and to the Hebrews themselves that God means business, that this God is real, that this God is the Lord. Water turned into blood, frogs everywhere, gnats everywhere, flies everywhere,

diseased animals, boils, a destructive hailstorm, an even more destructive infestation of locusts, darkness.

This is how it began. God sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh and told them that if the king demanded a sign -- a miracle -- then Aaron should throw down his walking stick and it would turn into a snake. Aaron did, and it did, but Pharaoh's magicians were able to do the same thing by means of their magic. It was a good trick, but no more than that -- a good trick.

And then, when Moses and Aaron produced the wonders of water turned to blood and the plague of frogs, Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate those feats, too. I have always found it rather funny, funny and sad, that Pharaoh's magicians seem so eager to reproduce the plagues visited upon them:

So you can turn water into blood and make it stinky and undrinkable? Look! We can make our water undrinkable too!

So you can put frogs everywhere -- in our beds and in our ovens and in our cooking pans? That's nothing! We can put frogs in our beds too!

It was turning into a magic contest, a battle of the sorcerers, until Aaron struck the ground and the land of Egypt was filled with clouds of gnats, and there was nothing the magicians could do to make any gnats appear. The magicians declared to Pharaoh: *God has done this! God has done this.*

Were they convinced this must be God's doing because it was something entirely beyond their skill? Probably. The magicians were not able to reproduce the effects of any other of the plagues and it seems that they even stopped trying. But it was not merely that Moses and Aaron were better sorcerers or that their God possessed a more powerful magic. The miracles that God performed in the sight of all Egypt were of an entirely different character and substance than the magic of Pharaoh's wise men.

There is a difference between miracle and magic. There is a great difference with respect to intent and to purpose. Magic intends to astonish, to draw attention to its own prowess, to put the focus on the power itself. Miracle intends to use the exercise of power to benefit another, to address the real needs of one human being or a group of human beings. Magic is used to do whatever the magician wants to do. But miracle is used to do the will of God. That's why Jesus so firmly resists the temptation to exercise divine power for his own benefit or his own glory -- to do that would be to misuse entirely the power of the Spirit of God that filled him, to make it no longer divine, but demonic.

The purpose of magic is to exert control, over nature and, ultimately, over other human beings, to bend and bind the will of others to serve the magician's aims. The magician "casts a spell" to take away the free choice and free exercise of power of the targeted person or persons. The purpose of miracle, on the other hand, is not to take away choice, but to give it, not to deny responsibility, but to empower it. Moses does not "cast a spell" on Pharaoh. The plagues are a consequence of his defiance of God, an expression of God's just anger. Pharaoh makes the choice to say *Yes* or to say *No*, and despite the terror of the plagues, he keeps saying *No*.

If the story of the exodus was about magic, God could have simply transported the Hebrews en masse from Egypt to Canaan in an instant or rendered them invisible to the Egyptians to allow them to slip away into the wilderness undetected. But the

story of the exodus is not about magic, it is about a miracle -- the miracle of God's just judgment, the miracle of God's righteous anger, the miracle of God's faithful love for his people. God's justice, God's faithfulness, God's love give the descendants of Abraham a gift -- the gift of freedom, the gift of possibility, the gift of a future. But it is a freedom for which they must take responsibility, a possibility they must grasp for themselves, a future they must claim in faith and trust in God. They must choose to follow Moses. They must choose to walk out of Egypt and into an unknown future. They must choose to believe God's promise. The miracle gives them a choice.

It is a real miracle. God does something for them that they are incapable of doing for themselves. They are forever in God's debt, forever defined as the people God brought out of Egypt and made his own. But the miracle does not leave them with less responsibility, but more. There is no happily ever after, no guaranteed outcome. God gives them an opportunity for life, but they must choose life. God gives them a chance at *shalom*, but they must choose to live in *shalom*. The miracle is an invitation, an invitation they can accept or refuse ... an invitation we can accept or refuse.

So why wouldn't you pray for a miracle?

Why wouldn't you pray that God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?

Why wouldn't you pray that God give you, that God give us, the opportunity to live in *shalom* and to make *shalom*?

Why wouldn't you pray that God lead us out of slavery and into the freedom of the children of God?

Why wouldn't you pray that God lead us to the land of promise?

Why wouldn't you pray for a miracle?

Why should you expect anything less? Why should you not expect a miracle from God?

It is a miracle that there is life at all.

It is a miracle that you have life -- a conscious life, a self-aware life, a life of freedom to act, a life of freedom to form lasting relationships.

It is a miracle that you can know God.

It is a miracle that God does know you!

It is a miracle that God loves you, that God has not and will never give up on you.

It is a miracle that God loves you enough to send Jesus to be your Savior and to be your Lord.

It is a miracle that in joining yourself to Jesus in faith, you have already died with him and have already been raised with him to eternal life!

A magic trick may amaze you for a moment ... but a miracle, the miracle of the love of God, stays with you forever!