

Is God A Magician?

Perspective of God

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I believe that they would stand in awe of mankind's marvelous technological accomplishments. And I mean it, they are marvelous. They undoubtedly spare us a great deal of the heavy and time-consuming, labor-intensive chores that even 75 or 100 years ago had to be done by sheer muscle power.

But we have to ask a question, and that is: Do they add to the quality of life? Does all this technology make us a better person? I think that we will all agree that technology does add an obviously desirable dimension to life. I mean, I would not want to go walking to the well every day to get the water. I would not want either myself or my wife to have to do the laundry by hand after she went to the river to get the water and heat it up on a wooden cook-stove until it was warm enough. I would not want to be restricted to only taking one bath a week, whether I needed it or not.

I mean, there are many things that I enjoy very much about the technology that we have. But I doubt very much whether these things really make us better people, because I think if you will think this through, in the final analysis you are going to agree that these things have almost nothing at all to do with what God is concerned about. And what God is concerned about is what is really important to living a truly abundant life.

But technology does put a spin on our thinking about life, our thinking about how life ought to be lived. And I think that technology is therefore worth considering for a bit. Technology has a way of bending our perceptions about the pace of life. And it also has a way of bending our perceptions about the expectations that we have about life and how difficulties should be resolved. Today, you have a problem? You push the button on a machine. Or you turn to some other form of technology to help you out.

Now let us suppose John Ritenbaugh has a problem. He has got to get to Chicago. Chicago is 800 miles away from Charlotte. But I can leave our

home in Charlotte, drive by automobile a half an hour to the airport in Charlotte, buy a ticket at the counter, go down, get on the plane, and be in Chicago in under three hours. Problem solved. So, with today's technology, we have opportunity to do things like that.

The question is—with regard to the things of God, with regard to other things of life that have nothing at all to do with technology—should not *all* problems be just as easily solved as that? For the kind of problems that we are most concerned about, technology does not help. It is wonderful if I have to get from here to there. It can really speed the pace with which I am able to accomplish things. But with regard to the things that God is interested in, the kind of problems that must be met and overcome if the real quality of life is going to be improved, technology does not help a bit.

Are we really better people because we now ride around in automobiles instead of with a horse-and-buggy? Or a horse? Or walk, for that matter? Are we really better people because we have television as opposed to the time when people primarily got their information through books or even by word of mouth? No, we are not.

What happens, though, is that technology subtly adjusts our expectations about life. I am not saying that we should go back to those times. Please do not misunderstand. God has permitted us to live during these times. He has permitted or perhaps even inspired some of these things to be developed so that we are able to use them. I am only saying that technology puts a spin on life that can be a great source of discouragement because our expectations regarding God are not met.

Have you noticed how much interest there is today in visible phenomena? I am talking about what we would normally class to be miracles. And now because of technology—and in this case meaning radio or television—practically everyone in the world can know that these things are happening. I do not care whether it is a report on flying saucer sightings, appearances of the Virgin Mary in an obscure village in Yugoslavia—or in northeast Georgia, for that matter—it can be reported to tens of thousands of people and then these people can go experience these things themselves. Even the Pope is reputed to have had a vision of the miracles of Lourdes given to him while he was in the hospital recuperating from that gunshot wound.

Given the oppressive and the frightening state that the world is in, and the disillusionment people are expressing about it, is it possible that demons are responding to give people miraculous occurrences and that people will be increasingly misled?

As we begin this sermon, let us begin by turning to Judges 6. This chapter contains the beginning of the story with Gideon, it is interesting to note perhaps one of our forefathers' attitudes toward these things. Gideon was a Manassite, and it says in verse 13,

Judges 6:13 Gideon said to Him [this Angel of the Lord], "O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

Does that ever sound modern? Have you ever heard anybody say that? "Oh, if there's a God, why doesn't He do something? Why does He allow all this violence on the street? Why does He allow poor, weak girls to be raped? Why does God allow these people to be drug addicts? Why does God allow wars to happen? Why does God allow ships to be sunk"—and you go on and on.

That thing can be attached to almost any kind of disaster. "Why does God allow earthquakes? Why does God allow firestorms? Why does God allow rainstorms to come and wash all the mud down the hills? Why all this tension between people? Where is this God? Why doesn't He work miracles to clear all of this up? Where is God when we need him? If God is so kind and merciful, why doesn't He work miracles to deliver us?"

Does not this statement by Gideon show his expectations of how he thought that his (and the nation's) problems should be resolved? Yes. "Let God do it!" See? Nevermind that the Israelites were doing evil. Let us just forget about that. And when people say it today, they are also doing the same thing that Gideon did. They are putting the evil, the sins of the nation, behind them and instead transferring a murmuring cry to God. "Why doesn't **He** do

something about it?" Well, why do **they** not do something about their lives? We might ask that right back. The Israelites indeed were suffering. But they wanted God, as expressed by Gideon, to remove the pain by working a miracle.

Well, let us shift gears just a little bit here. Almost every newspaper in the United States, on Saturday, features a Religion page, or even a Religion section. And in those parts of the newspaper, have you ever seen an advertisement for what I will call an itinerant evangelist who might be coming to your area soon? And he is advertising that he is coming and that he is going to put on a revival or something of that nature?

Most of the time, you will see these advertisements in a newspaper. Sometimes you will get them in a direct mailing that is made to your home. But wherever you see it, they almost all work on the same theme. They will proclaim miracle healings, miracle handkerchiefs, miracle meetings, miracle messages. They will even proclaim miracle magazines, miracle publishing houses, miracle valleys. And they will even claim to have the gift of working miracles. I have read all of these things.

Simple people are hungry to investigate these frauds because of the pain that they are in. They have problems and they would like to have them resolved quickly. So you go to an evangelistic campaign. You go to a revival. Somebody lays hands on you or pats you on the forehead, utters a prayer and "Bang!" The problems are over. The miracle-working magician, God, has come to the rescue.

There is nothing unusual about this miraculous approach to the solution of life's problems. Satan preys on deceived people's expectations about God and His purpose, because they have been deceived into believing that God should work miracles on demand. It may not be stated that way, but the thought is there. And these preachers play on that, on people's expectations about God.

As you have probably been able to tell, this sermon is about miracles and the place that they play in God's workings. And we are going to go now to Matthew 4.

Matthew 4:1-4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

This is more than just a dialogue between two individuals. This is the most stupendous moral contest of all time that was taking place here. A tremendous encounter between the epitome of good and the epitome of evil, and what was going to be decided here was the destiny of the whole world. Did you see what Satan's approach was? He was saying to Jesus Christ, "Solve the problem by making a miracle!" He was going to make, or try to make, Christ do it, while Christ was at a (he felt) very vulnerable point in time—vulnerable through His physical hunger. And his approach was to convince Christ that He really had no problem with that hunger. The solution was to just work a miracle. Without saying it, he was saying, "Christ, use Your powers selfishly. Work a miracle for Your own good."

Satan is subtly suggesting that the work of a miracle is the solution to personal problems, and also at the same time, the satisfaction of a physical need. He is suggesting—without actually saying it—he is implying that a miracle is nothing more than a capricious event. And that God will use it to merely satisfy some temporary human need.

The need indeed was present. Christ indeed was physically weak. But at the same time, He saw right through Satan's purpose and His reply is very interesting. He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by **every** word of God." The emphasis is on the word "every." And the reason is because, though the Bible does present God as a miracle-working God who delivers His people from their problems, it does not present a miracle-working God who works miracles on the demand of even His people. But rather, who works miracles that are consistent with **His** purpose and will.

God is in charge. We always have to remember that. Do not forget! God is a miracle-working God, but He always works miracles that are consistent with **His** purpose and with His will.

Look at Christ. God always equips a person to do the job that God gives them so that they can carry out His will for them. He gives us gifts by His Spirit to fulfill a responsibility within the body, to serve the body. And so God has empowered the person. But remember the reason why it is given. It is given to empower the person to do *God's* will. And so Christ had been given gifts far and above any other person who has ever lived, but those gifts were given to do God's will, not Christ's. And Christ was very hesitant, as you can see, about even feeding Himself, lest He find out that He had used His powers selfishly.

What Satan was subtly trying to do was to bend Christ's perception of reality. Christ saw through it, and this is why He replied what He did—that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word of God. So though Christ's hunger was real, and He could feel His weakness in every fiber of His being, the reality to Christ was not in the atoms and molecules of bread (that is, food), but in the Word of God. That is what His reply means.

Reality is in the Word of God. God's Word is ultimate truth or reality. God's Word, the ultimate reality, reveals God's will. It revealed it for Christ, too. And Christ then understood that His deliverance from that situation lay in His knowledge and understanding of God's Word. He knew then that He could not selfishly use His powers for His own good, in this case.

Understanding this principle is important to you and me for two reasons. Turn with me to Matthew 24. You know what is contained in this chapter: the Olivet prophecy. He is talking about the time of the end, and He says,

Matthew 24:24 For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

Hold your finger there and let us go to Revelation 13. Talking about the second beast, the lamb with two horns:

Revelation 13:13-14 He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived.

Reason number one that this is of concern for us—this thing about miracles—is because of what is coming. I think that we are going to hear and perhaps some of us will even witness what is going to amount to a blitzkrieg of visual phenomena, miracles that are going to be very persuasive. So persuasive, Jesus said, that if it is possible, even the very elect will be deceived. Now the concern is because of what is coming.

Matthew 7:22-23 Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

The second reason is because of the continuing attraction of miraculous occurrences. The second one is of more concern to me than the first because hopefully we will not even have to face much of the first, maybe none of it at all. But some will face it, because Jesus mentioned even the elect possibly being deceived by them, so some are going to face them and they are going to have to be able to perceive whether this is a miracle from God or from Satan.

But the second one is a problem on a day-to-day basis because our problems, like Christ's when He was fasting, are very real. Our problems—the ones that we are carrying now; the ones we are trying to overcome; the ones we are trying to resolve—are with us and it is very easy to look for a miraculous solution to these problems because God is a miracle-working God, is He not? Yes, He is. And because we would like to solve those problems just as quickly and easily as possible, we do not want our expectations to be discouraged in any way.

So we want these problems resolved, and the quicker the better. And we hope that God will take them away, and do it post-haste. But very frequently, nothing happens. We pray and we pray and we pray, looking for a miracle, looking for God to do something, and nothing happens.

What is a miracle? A miracle is a supernatural phenomenon, in the experience of man, presumably occurring in contradiction to the laws of nature. I will give that again. A miracle is a supernatural (which means over and above nature, beyond nature) phenomenon in the experience of men (because in the experience of God it is not miraculous at all) presumably occurring in contradiction to the laws of nature. To be a real miracle, it must be something that is more than merely coincidence, but something that is distinct from nature.

That miracles do occur is beyond question for us. The Bible attests to them over and over. But far more important is: What is their purpose? I think that we know enough about God to understand that He does not do things just for the sake of doing something that is interesting, mind-boggling, exciting, titillating. That is not what He is involved in. There is always a purpose undergirding His actions, even the hidden things that He does for people privately and secretly, that only they know about. We do not have to be mystified about what the purpose of miracles is, because God's Word tells us, very simply and very directly, what God's purpose is for the miracles that undergird His work.

We are going to turn to Hebrews 2, and here we have a general principle regarding miracles.

Hebrews 2:3-4 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 both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?

Miracles from God bear witness to truth. In this case, the truth is the good news of the Kingdom of God. Now, truth can stand on its own merits. This is witnessed to in the Bible in that one of the greatest of God's servants, John

the Baptist, did no miracles. God did no miracles through that man and yet by Jesus' own testimony he is one of the greatest of God's servants. But the truth that he preached—a ministry of repentance—stood on its own merits.

I am telling you this because I want you to understand that miracles from God are not really needed. But God does give them. And even if all the miracles of Christ are stripped away from the story of His ministry, the truth that He spoke would still stand on its own merits. But what Paul is saying here in Hebrews is that miracles do have a confirming value, so God grants them according to His purpose. They may be witnessing the truth of what is said, that what is said is truly from God. Or they may be establishing the validity of those who are saying it, or both, at one and the same time.

But let us understand something else: A miracle is something that is done primarily for those present when it is done. The reason for this is because the miracle loses much of its effectiveness in the retelling, unless—there is an exception to this—one has the Spirit of God and is empowered to recognize the truth of what is being relayed to him.

There is a great deal of skepticism in people. And there is a tendency to disbelieve a miraculous occurrence. We even have one state out there—Missouri—that is called the "Show Me" state. They are showing man's skepticism about things. So miracles are primarily done for the benefit of those who are on the spot, and they are witnessing it. Because miracles tend to lose their power in the retelling.

It is interesting here that this word "signs" in Hebrews 2:4 is the Greek word *semeion*. It is sometimes translated "miracles." But this word is really a different word from the word that is normally used to translate into the English word "miracle," and that is why they have chosen to translate it "signs." Because this word puts the emphasis on the *meaning* of the miracle or the event, and when that word is used it is saying that this is not just a pointless display of power. They point to something beyond themselves and that is why the translators translated the word into the English word "signs." What does a sign do? A sign points to something else or it identifies something else. You do not see signs that just have the word "sign" on them.

John was the one who most frequently used this word for miracles. He was trying to teach those who are reading this that these miracles were pointing to something else. They were giving credence to something and we were not to concentrate on the miracle, we were to focus our attention on what it was pointing to.

Most frequently what it was pointing to was the One who was doing the miracles, or the message the one who was doing the miracles was giving. Now, pay very strict attention to this because it is important in being able to identify whether a miracle is from God, or whether a miracle is from a demon or Satan.

We have to remember, right in this verse, it says, "according to His own will." Remember this principle: that God, as He wills, focuses attention on, points to, demonstrates the truth of what is said or who says it. God demonstrated, then, who He was working through by means of miracles. You can see this all the way through the Bible.

When Moses did miracles with Aaron, what was He doing? He was focusing attention on what the men were saying and He was focusing attention on who were His representatives. And so He added a dimension to what they were doing by producing a miracle. So it gave credence then to what they were doing and who they were. He did this all the way through: Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, Christ, the apostles.

But miracle-working reached its climax in Jesus Christ, who was what? He was Truth personified. And so what did God want to do through this? He wanted to focus attention on this Man who was Truth personified and what this Man was saying. He was not doing these things haphazardly. There was a purpose behind what He was doing, and so they then demonstrated in a way unparalleled in human history Who He was and the truth of what He said.

God's healings and other miracles are indeed acts of deliverance, like dividing the Red Sea. He delivered the people of Israel. They are acts of mercy. If He had not divided the Red Sea, then what would have happened? They would have been trapped between the army and the Red Sea. You see,

God is still following the principle, even when He does something like a healing. What do they do? They demonstrate the truth of His Word. When a person is healed, it is demonstrating the truth of His Word, or it is demonstrating the truth of God's name. He calls himself YHWH-Ropheka, "God is Healer." But always, it is as He wills. Always remember that.

It is unfortunate that so many of these miraculous occurrences are recorded all over the world. You may hear of bleeding hands, weeping and bleeding statues, apparitions appearing to children delivering them messages, visions of saints seen by looking through a certain window (we had that one in Columbia, SC for quite a long period of time), voices heard commanding people to do certain things, people being healed by dipping themselves in a certain pool of water or touching some sacred object. And there are many more besides. Now, ask yourself this question (I will ask it of you, though): What do any of these things have to do with confirming the truth of God's Word? Not a thing!

Let us look at three scriptures again, those ones that we looked at before. Matthew 24:24, just very quickly.

Matthew 24:24 For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders **to deceive**. . .

Revelation 13:13-14 He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth. . .

Matthew 7:22-23 Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

Now we are going to add one scripture to this, in Deuteronomy 13.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the

sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods which you have not known and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.

In each case, the admonishment from Christ is for us to have a healthy skepticism of miracles because miracles may produce deception. It is not that the miracle does not occur, but what is important is: Does it give witness to the truth? Does it give witness to the ultimate reality? Does it give witness to the will of God?

Both in Jesus' case, in the New Testament, and in Moses' case, in the Old Testament, it is made very clear—regardless of the wonder done—if a person even implies that one is free to disobey God, the miracle is not a demonstration of God's truth. A miracle it was, but it is not a demonstration of God's truth.

You are going to have to be especially skeptical of Protestantism, because they will tell you that they believe in keeping God's laws and then they will turn right around and tell you that the Sabbath and holy days are done away, and that with "true Christians" it is alright if they keep Christmas, Easter, Halloween, et cetera, et cetera. But they "believe" that they are to keep God's laws. It is really deceptive especially because so many of those people are really nice people.

Let us go back to I John 4:1. Here we are approaching the end of the first century and John warns the church:

I John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Jesus said in Matthew 24:24 that many false prophets and false christs will arise, and that they are going to be doing signs and wonders and it is going to be possible for them to deceive. The Bible then is very clear that in the church era, spiritual power to do miracles is present in false ministers but that it is evil and it is misdirected.

The spirit the power comes from is revealed in the doctrine of the prophet. Jesus said, "Depart from Me you who work lawlessness." Moses said if they say anything about worshipping another god, they are not of God. Revelation 13 says that these miracles are going to deceive people into worshipping the beast; that is a false god. These things are not witnessing to the truth. And so though you see a miracle, you can tell the source through the doctrine, through what they are going to be teaching. The doctrine of the prophet.

Please take this warning in II Thessalonians 2:9-10. Again talking about the time that we live in, talking about the time of the end, he says:

II Thessalonians 2:9-10 The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs [there is that word again], and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish [Why do they perish?], because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

Be very careful here, because he does not say that they did not receive the truth. He says that they perished because they did not receive the **love** of the truth. And if we are going to be saved through these perilous times with miracles occurring all over the place, maybe hearing about them practically daily, those who are going to make it are those who *love the truth!*

Did Jesus love the truth in Matthew 4:4? He was willing to die of starvation rather than use His powers to serve Himself. And so He said "Man shall not

live by bread alone but by every word of God." And every Word of God taught Him that He should not be selfish in that way, that He was to use His powers in the service of God. Not even to save His own life.

You remember at the end, He told Pilate, "You think that I couldn't call on My Father and get twelve legions of angels?" He could command their loyalty. But what would that have done? It would have disrupted the prophetic sequence of events. He knew it was God's will that He die. So He gave up His life rather than save Himself. They taunted Him that way. "Oh, He saved others. Now, come down off that stake there, Jesus, and save yourself." But He resisted the impulse to do that.

Now we have got to translate that into our own lives and understand that the blindness that he speaks of there in II Thessalonians 2:11, a "strong delusion," is something that is self-imposed on these people because of their refusal to love the truth. It is not that these people refuse to *accept* truth. They do not *love* it! There is a difference. We are talking here about a matter of the heart, not a matter of the brain, not a matter of the intelligence, but an emotional quality. These people are going to fail because they do not **love** truth! It means that they are indifferent toward it.

Think of a relationship with another person. And remember what truth is; it is personified as Christ. We are talking about another Person, not just words, ink on the pages of a book, but the words of our lover, Jesus Christ. And these people are going to perish because they do not love it. They are not committed to it. They are indifferent toward it. They are not zealous about serving it.

It is very much like two people living together in a union, "shacking up" together, where no real love exists. And when a fairly strong sexual temptation occurs, it is pretty easy to step out of that arrangement and go into another one. What we are talking about here is a matter of **dedication** to truth. That is what keeps people from being deceived. It is not just an intellectual matter.

These verses that we just went through clearly establish that Satan is permitted to use his powers to work miracles and he uses his powers according to the same principle that God does. He uses it to give credence to

his **false** doctrine. Now at the same time, this provides a test for the people-of-God's dedication to truth. Deuteronomy 13:1-5. God says, "I'm testing you."

This raises a question then. Will faith produce miracles? Now some claim that based on the promises of Christ, that proper faith produces miraculous workings of God's Spirit. In other words, that strong faith will produce great miracles, and weak faith, little ones, because the miraculous is available to us because of our faith. Now again, the book of Hebrews has the answer. This time we are going to go to the Faith Chapter.

Very quickly I just want you to think about what Paul is telling us in this chapter.

Hebrews 11:3 By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.

What does faith produce? "By faith we understand."

Hebrews 11:4 By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.

"By faith . . . offered to God a more excellent sacrifice." Faith enabled him to have the willingness to offer the right sacrifice.

Hebrews 11:7 By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

"By faith, Noah being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear and prepared an ark." Faith produced the diligence to prepare the ark.

Hebrews 11:11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.

"By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive." Strength to conceive.

Hebrews 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off." Faith produces vision.

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac." Faith enabled him to offer up his son.

Hebrews 11:20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

"By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob." The blessing came by faith.

Hebrews 11:21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.

"By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph." Jacob blessed Ephraim and Manasseh.

Hebrews 11:22 By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

"By faith, Joseph when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel." It enabled him to prophesy.

Hebrews 11:23 By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command.

"By faith Moses when he was born was hidden." Moses was hidden by faith. That is what it produced.

Verses 24-29—all things that occurred there with Moses beginning with "Moses forsook Egypt."

If you review the whole chapter, precious few of the results of faith come under the heading of overt miracles. This is not to say that they do not occur. It is to say what God is putting emphasis on. Most of the results of faith God shows in this chapter were an inner resolution by which the people patiently labored, endured afflictions, were enabled to steadfastly go through painful afflictions, and overcame. They became conquerors through faith.

Turn with me to Job 13. In his argument with these three men, he says:

Job 13:13-16 Hold your peace with me, and let me speak, then let come on me what may! Why do I take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in my hands? Though He slay me [What is he telling you? He is putting his life on the line], yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him. He also shall be my salvation, for a hypocrite could not come before Him.

It was faith that undergirded that kind of resolve in Job. There was true conviction because of God's Word.

Do miracles produce faith? This is the flip side of that coin. Does faith produce miracles? The answer to that is yes, but that is not God's emphasis. Now do miracles produce faith? To answer that, we have the lesson of the Israelites coming out of Egypt, where he says very clearly in Hebrews 4:2:

Hebrews 4:2 For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

Was there any group of people who ever saw so many miracles (until the apostles came along and they watched all those things that Jesus did)? No, I would say that if there was any group of people who witnessed **more** miracles than anybody (except the apostles), it was the Israelites coming out of Egypt. And they failed because they did not have any faith.

Miracles only produce faith for a short period of time. They are not an effective means of producing faith. That is why God is not overly concerned about them. What He is concerned about is diligence, discipline, patience, steadfast endurance. Now there is a miracle: changing human nature to resolutely go in the right direction!

There is another interesting occurrence with Jesus' apostles in Matthew 16.

Matthew 16:7-8 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have taken no bread." But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them [He is talking to His disciples here], "O you of little faith. . . "

Here are these men who were witnessing all of these awesome things that He was doing, and He accused them, He indicted them of not having very much faith. Now one would think that if miracles build faith, there surely should have been faith in those men above all people on earth. They knew the things were genuine. But they do not have much value in terms of building faith. That is why God is not concerned about working miracles with us all the time. They do not really help all that much. Let us go on.

Matthew 16:8-10 . . . why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up?

That quickly they forgot it. They forgot the miracles that quickly. See, they did not understand the nature of His ministry and so they could not make the right connections.

Faith is not produced by miracles, but it is produced by the Word of God. Romans 10:17, does it not say that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"? That is where faith comes from. A right understanding of right doctrine will produce faith. No external phenomena apart from already understanding will cause us to believe.

There is perhaps even a more critical question. Do faithful, spiritually-minded people really **need** a sign? Hebrews 11 gives no indication that these people, whose lives are extolled by God, needed miracles in order to keep them going. But in Matthew 16, notice what Jesus says.

Matthew 16:1-4 Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.

Who was it, brethren, who asked for a sign? Who asked for a miracle? It was those whose hearts were farthest from Him. It was the unbelieving, the hecklers. It was the critics. These were people who cared nothing for the real Jesus and so occasionally they became the objects of His scathing denunciations. "Hypocrites," He called them for asking for a sign.

Those who ask for signs or seek miracles, who put out the fleece like Gideon did, do you realize that they are casting insults on the Word of God? They are calling it into question. They are profaning His name. They are, in effect, calling Him a liar. Because if He says He will do something, it is impossible for Him to lie. He will do it!

This can be very sobering. I am reminded of that advertisement that I used to see on television every once in awhile. I cannot remember who the advertisement was about, it just had a woman in there all dressed up in a gown-like affair and she said, "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature," and then Boom! You know, a lightning bolt would come out! God, I am sure, takes our immaturity into account. But it is not nice to call Him into question. That is tempting Him. And if He says He will do something, He will do it, according to His will.

Then a call for a miracle characterizes (by Jesus' own words) carnality, not spirituality.

The next question then has to be: Will not God work a miracle in answer to a given prayer? He makes an awful lot of promises, such as healing, which indeed is a miracle. Will He perform a miracle for you and me? Yes, He will. But if we would search His Word we would find more than a dozen qualifications for answered prayer, not just three or four. I counted twelve of them yesterday. We are not going to go into that.

Twelve qualifications for answered prayer. Some of them are of major importance, some of less importance, and I do not think that He requires that each and every qualification be met perfectly. Because whether or not God grants our request seems to boil down to three broad areas. Four, actually, but three of them on our part.

One is the way we are living. Two is the understanding involved in the request. And number three is the attitude in which the request is made. When those three are combined with God's will, then the answer becomes clear. He will do it. But He will do it in His time and He will do it in a way that will give credence to His Word, to His truth, to His purpose.

Let us look at an example of a man who did not receive an answer to his prayer that one would expect to find pleasant. The apostle Paul in II Corinthians 12 says:

II Corinthians 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh

was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul asked for a miraculous deliverance and God said, "No." Now Paul had faith, he was living right, he understood the request. There was no presumptuousness in his asking. But it was not God's will! Because from God's perspective there were overriding reasons not to grant the request. It was not needed to witness to the truth. Paul's development, salvation, and humble reliance on Christ, because of his infirmity, were exceedingly more important.

Will God grant a miraculous healing to Paul? Yes, He will. But it will come in the resurrection. And that will be far more miraculous than just taking the thorn out of his flesh temporarily until he died.

The working of God's power to perform a miracle ultimately depends upon God's sovereignty. He invites us to pray, to believe in Him, to trust Him for His decision. And then the method of response must be left in His hands. When we do this, brethren, we are learning to live under His government.

Are miracles God's normal way of working? The answer is, absolutely, No. His normal way of working is through natural law. If God was constantly intervening in the natural order of things, it would completely disturb the balance of nature. For instance, God shows that one of the blessings of life He gives is rain. Now God does make it rain according to natural law. But if God kept intervening all the time, it would rain so often that floods would result.

Another result that would occur if God was constantly intervening by way of miracles, because His children were asking for them, is that they would become irresponsible, spoiled children. The normal course of the creation is

that whatever a man sows, that shall he reap. This is the path that God puts us on to true spiritual responsibility.

The record of God's Word is clear. It says in I Corinthians 3:9 that "we are laborers together with God." Even Jesus had to learn by the things that He suffered. God was not always jumping in and intervening in Christ's life.

You study Paul's record of the tribulations, which show God intervened just enough to allow Paul to finish his course. You look at the things that man went through: he was stoned, he was probably raised from the dead (so God intervened). He was left for dead, and God raised him that time. But when He raised him up, did He take all the problems away from Paul? No. Paul got shipwrecked, Paul was in trouble with robbers, Paul was in trouble with the weather, Paul was taking persecutions from the Jews, and on and on and on it went.

I hope that you do not find that discouraging. Remember we are laborers **together** with God. God does not present Himself to us as a magician, but as a Savior. And spiritually-minded people take God at His Word, and endeavor to be responsible workers together with Him. God in His love does not choose to do all the work Himself. Because if He did, the character would never be written in our hearts and minds.

And so He miraculously intervenes just enough to supply our daily need, to give us the strength to finish the course. Occasionally He will do something miraculous to encourage us, let us know that He is with us, remind us that He is still listening to our prayers. He will do what it takes. But understand that this miracle-working God has chosen, for our good, to not just be intervening all the time. The miraculous thing in our life is that we learn, because we trust Him, to endure to the end. Those are the ones who are going to be saved. And that will be a tremendous miracle.