

Miracles and Mustard Seeds

A miracle is a supernatural act; something that defies the laws of nature. A supernatural act requires a spiritual influence in order to bring it about. Satan and demons can do miracles, albeit limited, but they can cause supernatural things to happen in our midst because they are angels. Angels are spirit beings that operate outside the bounds of the physical world; not being limited by the laws of nature as we are. Of course, God can do miracles. The kind of miracles God can bring about far exceed the miracles wrought by angels. This is because God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present; attributes that only He has, as He alone is divine. God can do anything, anything except things which are logically impossible. Here are some examples of things that God can't do, because they are logically impossible; make a round square, make $1+1=3$, beat Himself in arm-wrestling, or become greater or lesser in any way. All of these are logically impossible. One might say, *"Wait, miracles are logically impossible, aren't they?"* No, a miracle is only logically impossible for a human operating under his own power. For God, miracles aren't logically impossible, they are actually necessary. This is true because God is outside of the laws of physics. God is unaffected by anything in the universe. Since God is not limited by time, space, and matter, it's entirely reasonable that He operate supernaturally.

The Bible records many of God's miracles as He engages His creation. This begs the question, *"Why don't we see miracles today in the way we read about them in the Bible?"* This essay aims to answer that question, as well as shed light on what is meant when Jesus says that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed then you can move mountains. (Matthew 17:20).

Reading the Bible, you'll see Peter, an ordinary man like you and me. Yet Peter raises the dead, walks on water, and had other miracles worked through him. One might read these stories and assume that God endows all believers with the ability to perform miracles. After all, Peter says that Christians ***"have received a faith of the same kind as ours,"*** 2 Peter 1:1. Does that mean any Christian can work a miracle? This thought might come up, especially after Jesus said, ***"if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you."*** Why does Jesus say this? In all of history, I've never heard of a person successfully commanding a mountain to hurl itself into the sea. So, does that mean that no person has ever had faith, not even faith the size of a mustard seed? Of course not. I'd be wrong to conclude that. Plenty of Christians have had, and continue to have, strong faith. So, the reason that no Christian has ever commanded a mountain to be tossed into the sea, is that God hasn't told anyone to hurl a mountain into the sea. This is the same reason that I have never walked on water, nor have I ever raised the dead. God hasn't told me to do it. That's one of the key reasons that I'm not seeing the types of miracles happening in my midst that I read about in the Bible. Consider this, Peter was able to raise someone from the dead, because God told him to do it, and Peter responded in faith (Acts 9:40). Peter was able to walk on water, because God told Him to do it, and Peter responded in faith (Matthew 14:29). It's not necessarily that I lack faith, but that God hasn't asked me to be His instrument for any supernatural act. Therefore, in this context, two things need to exist for me to see a miracle wrought through me. First, God has to call me to do it. Second, I have to respond to that call with at least a mustard seed sized amount of faith.

Furthermore, when considering the Lord's statement about having a mustard seed sized faith, it's important to look at the context of the statement, which comes immediately after a man saw his son healed from demon possession. Jesus' disciples were not able to cast a demon out of a particular young man. That young man's father pleaded with Jesus to act, but the man wasn't sure if Jesus was capable. The man said to Jesus, ***"If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"*** Jesus responded, ***"If You can? All things are possible to him who believes."*** To which the man replied, ***"I do believe; help my unbelief."*** Pause right here. Do you see the man's confession and prayer? The man's cry, ***"I do believe; help my unbelief,"*** is a mixture of owning his lack of faith, while at the same time exhibiting a tiny amount of faith by which he asks Jesus to increase his faith, ***"help my unbelief!"*** That's a mustard seed sized faith! The amount of faith this man exhibits is so small that it's only a glimmer. Yet, even with that glimmer of faith, the Lord saw fit to bring about what the man had asked for. A mustard seed is viewed by the Jews as the smallest of seeds, yet it produces a very large plant. A mustard seed serves as a proverbial way for Jews to denote something very tiny.

After Jesus cast the demon out of this man's son, His disciples came to Him and asked Him, ***"Why could we not drive it out?" And He said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith."*** The ***"littleness"*** of their faith didn't imply that they had a mustard seed sized faith, but implies their unbelief, which is why Jesus followed by saying, ***"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed..."*** Apparently, the disciples operated with fear and doubt in their attempts to cast out this demon. This sort of fear and doubt would leave them when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost (Acts 2). However, this newfound confidence brought on by the Holy Spirit didn't mean that the disciples would perform miracles on demand. In fact, when we pan out and see the broader scope of the apostles works, the miracles they wrought were far less common than we might expect. One of my favorite pastors, John Piper, says this, ***"There were fewer miracles in the Bible than you probably think, and there are more miracles today than you probably know."***

Let's look at the Apostle Paul. How many miracles did God work through Paul? Here's a breakdown of the miracles spoken of in his ministry. His first recorded miracle, 44 A.D., was making the false prophet Elymas blind (Acts 13:11). Next, about 46 A.D., it speaks of signs and wonders being done by Paul (Acts 14:3). In 50 A.D., he casts out a demon out of a girl (Acts 16:18). From 50-52 A.D., he worked various signs and wonders according to 2 Corinthians 12:12. From 54-56 A.D. special works of power were wrought by Paul, including Paul sending pieces of his clothes to be touched by individuals for the purpose of healing (Acts 19:11-12). In 58 A.D. Paul raised Eutychus back from the dead, after Eutychus fell out of a third story window and died (Acts 20:9-10). From 60-61 A.D. Paul heals people on the island of Malta (Acts 28:8-9). Paul speaks generally about other miracles wrought through him when he writes Romans 15:18-19, which was written about 57 A.D.

All this is meant to say that, when we pan out over a period of about 13 years, Paul is averaging a few miracles a year. It's not that he was daily healing the sick as he walked the streets. In fact, he mentions in 2 Timothy 4:20, ***"Trophimus I left sick at Miletus,"*** showing that even his buddies must stay sick until the Lord wills for them to be well.

As we read the gospels, we see Jesus doing many miracles in His three-year ministry. Then, in the book of Acts, the apostles (a word meaning, "one sent with authority") are doing miracles more steadily in the beginning of Acts, but the number of miracles taper off as Acts progresses. These truths help us to understand what the purpose of miracles is all about. Miracles accompanied Moses' message to Pharaoh in order to validate that Moses was speaking on behalf of God. Miracles accompanied Jesus' messages to those He taught, in order to validate that He was God. Miracles accompanied the apostle's message to the nations, in order to validate that their gospel was from God. In short, miracles validate God's Word.

Historically, in the ministry of the apostles to the unreached regions, once a local church got it's footing, the number of miracles wrought in that region would dissipate. By the time of the epistles (books like Galatians, Ephesians, 1 John), which are the letters that the apostles wrote to the churches which they founded, we don't read that the Church is told to do miracles. We need to understand that the office of Apostle given to men like Paul, John, and Peter, is not an office that anyone holds today. The original Biblical apostles had a unique authority of miracles endowed to them by God. But, this doesn't mean that no miracles are happening any more.

Most of the civilized world today has an established Christian Church, and in these regions, there are few reports, if any, of miracles being wrought amidst them. By miracles, I mean immediate demonstrations of supernatural acts. I'm not referring to the local church praying for a healing, and that healing coming about (which certainly does happen). I'm speaking of immediate sight to the blind, or immediate hearing to the deaf, etc. These sorts of miracles are still taking place in unreached areas, where the gospel hasn't yet taken root. When pastors and missionaries go to these remote areas and begin to preach the gospel anew, sometimes miracles will accompany their message in order to validate this new news of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

One such story of this comes from a modern-day pastor, Francis Chan, who in 2019 was on a mission trip in the country of Myanmar. There, in a remote village, the Lord used him to heal supernaturally. Later Chan said the following in one

of his sermons, *“Over the years, when I meet the sick, I pray for them and I believe for healing. And I’m so shocked, because every time I pray, nothing would happen. It gets discouraging. However, recently, when sharing the gospel with the people in Myanmar, I prayed, ‘God please, please hear me. Jesus, if you were here, I know what you would do. You would heal these people.’ People started coming forward for healing. Every person I touched was healed. You guys, this is craziness! I’ve never experienced this in 52 years of living.”*

The bottom line is that God has sufficiently provided evidence to those in reached areas; Bibles available to be purchased, local churches to hear the truth preached, Christian radio, etc. Additional evidence, like miracles, aren’t needed. There will always be those, that despite having sufficient evidence, will continue to ask for miracles; pretending that another miracle will surely compel their faith. Jesus knows this isn’t true, and remarks, **“An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah,”** (Matthew 16:4). Here, Jesus means that the only evidence you need is the sign of Jonah, which was an abbreviated way of reminding the people of what He said before, **“just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth,”** (Matthew 12:40). In other words, the miraculous evidence that you need to entrust yourself to Jesus will be his resurrection from the dead. Three days in the grave, only to rise again and put an exclamation point on His ministry!

Jesus reiterates that more miracles, more evidence, shouldn’t be needed for those that already have been exposed to the truth. This is why Jesus rebukes Thomas, who already knew Jesus, and who had already heard from the other disciples that Jesus rose from the dead. Yet, despite the testimony of eye-witnesses, Thomas doubted and wanted to see with his own eyes. Jesus’ rebukes him, **“Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed,”** John 20:29. In other words, Jesus is saying that we need to trust the evidence of the eye-witnesses, and make a decision based on the sufficient evidence that’s already provided. The eyewitnesses to Jesus have provided us the New Testament, and the 27 books of the New Testament continue to validate the 39 books of the Old Testament.

Man has always been able to consider the miracles of God, as a way to assure ourselves of God’s faithfulness. For example, miracles that took place way back in the early times of the Old Testament, served to encourage the faith of those in the later days of the Old Testament. For example, the Psalmist says, **“I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old,”** (Psalm 77:11). The writer here wasn’t needing to see miracles for himself, but reiterates that the miracles of old compel his current faith. Perhaps people in the days of David would cry out, *“Why don’t we get to see the miracles that we read about from the days of Moses?”* Miracles seem to be prevalent in certain regions, for certain times, and then many years might go by where it seemed God was working no miracles at all. Yet, God is always working miracles all around the world, just not miracles that are on display for the masses.

Leaping ahead into the New Testament, books like 1 Corinthians speak of giftings like miracles, healings, and casting of demons. And we see these giftings operated through some, albeit few people, in the first century Church. But beyond that, we don’t see these particular demonstrative giftings being worked in the manner and frequency as Jesus worked them. Times changed, especially as New Testament books were written and dispersed. Yet, missionaries from all over the world will report of miraculous wonders in their remote ministries. All of this goes to show us that faith is not to be solely based on miracles, at least not on miracles that we see first-hand.

Finally, let’s choose a particular miracle of Jesus’ to examine more closely, His first miracle as a human, turning water to wine. This story provides insights as to the purpose of miracles. Let’s unpack John 2:1-11, starting with verses 1-2, **“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.”**

Let’s start with some of the often-overlooked details that John includes in his gospel. John says there was a wedding **“on the third day.”** It’s likely that this detail flows from what was said in chapter one, giving reference to how many days

had elapsed since Nathaniel followed Jesus. This third-day reference doesn't seem to refer to the wedding being on the third day of the week (Tuesday), as Jewish virgins didn't marry on a Tuesday. Jews had rules regarding wedding days, and virgins married on the 4th day of the week, Wednesday. This was because the Sanhedrin (the governing body of the Jews) met on the 2nd and 5th days of the week (Monday and Thursday), and if there was a dispute about virginity, the husband may come to the Sanhedrin council the morning after the wedding. In contrast, widows married on the 5th day of the week, Thursday. Looking back at chapter one, it's believed the disciples "***stayed with Him*** (Jesus) ***that day***" (1:39), a Sabbath/Saturday. If so, then "***the next day***" (1:43) is Sunday, when Jesus went to Galilee and found Philip and Nathanael, making the wedding the 3rd day from Sunday, a Wednesday, which lines up with Jewish custom.

On a side note, verse one also mentions that Jesus' mother was at the wedding. It's believed that Joseph isn't mentioned here, as he's presumed to have passed away by this point, according to many scholars.

Verses 3-4, "***When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come.'***"

Jesus' reply to Mary is peculiar, "***Woman, what does this have to do with us?***" Here, Mary is pressing Jesus for a divine act. Mary was not involved in the divine work of the Godhead, so her "mothering" of Jesus to work a miracle is not fitting, as Jesus reminds her of her role as "***Woman***"; a created being of God, not a "mother of God" in the sense that she can rightly tell Jesus when to work a miracle. As a man, Jesus is her son, but as God, Jesus is her Lord, and she ought not to insist upon Him in the manners of His divinity. Jesus' response shows her that running out of wine isn't a problem that requires God's intervention. Additionally, this response of Jesus' also teaches Mary and the disciples that miracles were not to be favored to family and friends; to be called upon when convenient. It's interesting to note that during Jesus' ministry years, He would at times forgo favoring Mary, as we see in several instances, so as to not create a need for man to favor her or worship her. Sadly, some faiths do worship Mary.

Jesus goes on, "***My hour has not yet come.***" Everything Jesus did, regarding His divine ministry, had a right and fitting time. His public miracles would be on full display soon enough, but not yet. Here, He's about to accommodate this request, for the purpose of confirming the faith of His new disciples, as verse 11 confirms the greater reason for this miracle. This wedding miracle would only be known by a few. His turning tables and preaching in the temple would be the first occasion of His full-public ministry (John 2:13-23).

Verses 5-8, "***His mother said to the servants, 'Whatever He says to you, do it.' Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the waterpots with water.' So they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, 'Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter.' So they took it to him.***"

Mary's insistence implies she's a hostess, and that this is a wedding of a close friend or relative. This must be the case as Jesus wouldn't likely bring along so many personal guests unless His family was that close to the wedding party. Mary has great personal concern about the wine and guests, and appears that she's over the servants; giving them direction, "***Whatever He says to you, do it.***" Even though Jesus had just reproved her request, she's putting her hope in His mercy and continues to direct the wedding servants at Jesus.

At the wedding were "***six stone waterpots.***" John giving us the exact number of waterpots is not an insignificant detail. Jews required that 10 men attend a wedding in order for it to be officially recognized. Here, having six waterpots, "***containing twenty or thirty gallons each,***" hints at the number of guests. This detail also serves to clarify the degree of privacy around this miracle, as so many guests would have certainly turned their attention to Jesus had they all known what happened. Clearly the secret of the miracle was kept to only a few.

The ***"Jewish custom of purification,"*** was one of washing hands and feet when entering a building or sitting down to eat. This went well beyond hygiene, as ***"purification"*** was a rigid custom (Mark 7:2-4). These pots would be brought in according to the expected number of guests. One couldn't tell simply by looking at them exactly how much each held, as the pots were made of stone, cut by hand, and impossible to be equally cut. So, John can only estimate that the pots were ***"twenty or thirty gallons each."*** The large quantity of liquid that these pots held, also shows the liberality of the miracle; supplying the festivities for all of the remaining days of the customary seven-day feast that follows a Jewish wedding. Additionally, this miracle made these foot-washing pots no longer good for ceremonial purification; hinting that Jewish purification was of no value spiritually anyway.

Jesus directs the staff to fill the water pots, which they did. Then, He directs the servants, ***"Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it to him."*** Only Mary, the disciples, and the servants who filled the water jugs are aware of the miracle.

Verses 9-11, ***"When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him."***

Verse 11 concludes, ***"His disciples believed in Him."*** For the disciples who accompanied Jesus to the wedding, previously called by Jesus to follow Him, they believed more abundantly after this miracle. The miracle added confirmation to the faith that had been previously stirred in the disciples by the Holy Spirit.

It's amazing that Jesus uses common foot-washing water and turns it into ***"the good wine."*** You can bet that this wine was the best the head-waiter had ever tasted! Foot-water was only fit to be handled by servants, and usually Gentile servants, as no respectable Jew would perform such a lowly act. This miracle is sort of symbolic of what Jesus does with us. We're the dirty foot water that He makes into something amazing, something superior! Will you let Jesus transform you? When He does so, it's a miracle!