



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.10 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Use of Miracles in His Preservation of the World

Sometimes God chooses to do His work through miracles. A miracle is something that God does outside the normal laws of nature. For example, when God wanted the Israelites to cross the Red Sea to escape the pursuing Egyptian forces, He made the water gather up in heaps on both sides of the dry path that He made for them. As soon as they were across, He made the water behave as it normally behaves, and the Egyptians were drowned. Psalm 33:7 says: **“He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap.”** And Psalm 78:13 tells: **“He divided the sea and caused them to pass through; and He made the waters stand up like a heap.”**

The original languages of the Bible and most translations use various words to convey the idea of a miracle. For example, they are called “wonders”, “miracles”, “marvelous works”, “wondrous works”, “wonderful works”, “signs”, “mighty deeds”, “mighty acts”, “powers”, or “mighty works”.

Only God can perform true miracles. After the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, they sang these words: **“Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?”** (Exodus 15:11). Psalm 72:18 says: **“Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things!”**

God alone decides when and how to do miracles. We should be on guard against so-called faith healers, who claim to be able to do miracles with the power of God. Many of these faith healers have proved to be frauds, and they can do real damage. For example, they can deter sick people from using the normal means God has already provided for their cure, such as medicine, surgery, and a genuine doctor's expertise. If a faith-healer fails to work a cure, he may blame the person and say that if the faith of the sick person had been greater, the person would have been cured. This can make the sick person doubt whether they are a true Christian. God can do miracles today, but not at the command of a healer. Moreover, faith healers generally try to attain glory and acclaim for themselves rather than give glory to God.

There have been periods in history when God has chosen to do many miracles. For example: the days of Moses and Joshua when God led the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan; the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha when God chose to prove His superiority over the idols of the Canaanites; and the days of Jesus and His apostles when God chose to demonstrate that Jesus Himself was God and that His apostles were associated with Him. Apart from these examples in history, miracles have been quite rare.

Joseph and Daniel were given special dreams from God, and they were given the interpretations of other men's dreams as well. When the Pharaoh's butler and baker had dreams that troubled them, their fellow-prisoner Joseph said to them: **“Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please”** (Genesis 40:8). Then when the Pharaoh himself had a troubling dream, Joseph said to him: **“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace”** (Genesis 41:16). Daniel also was quick to give glory to God rather than to himself. He said to King Nebuchadnezzar: **“There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days... This secret has not been revealed to me because I have more wisdom than anyone living”** (Daniel 2:28-30).

God has occasionally used dreams to reveal things to others in the past, like Joseph (Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19) and the wise men from the East (Matthew 2:12); however, God nowhere promises to reveal things to us through dreams and we should not expect Him to reveal things to us through dreams. In fact, God warned against false prophets who announced their dreams: **“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal. The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?’ says the LORD”** (Jeremiah 23:25-28). In these verses God clearly distinguishes between His word and a dream. God says that dreams are chaff, but His word is nourishing wheat. Hebrews 1:1-2 tell us: **“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.”** Jesus is the ultimate revelation from God. Jesus and His apostles point us to the words they spoke and wrote as the true word of God and our source of life and faith.

There is one big difference between the miracles of prophets and apostles, on the one hand, and the miracles of Jesus, on the other. Jesus did His miracles by His own divine power to reveal His own glory. On the occasion of Jesus’ first miracle of changing water into wine, John records: **“This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory”** (John 2:11). The prophets and apostles, however, did their mighty wonders at God’s direction and by His power to bring glory to Him. After Peter healed the crippled beggar at the gate of the temple, he said to the crowd that gathered: **“Why look so intensely at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ...His name (the name of Jesus), through faith in His name, has made this man strong”** (Acts 3:11, 16).

At times God has allowed His enemies (such as Satan and unbelievers) to do wonders that seem like genuine miracles of God. Pharaoh’s sorcerers were able to duplicate the wonders that Moses and Aaron were doing up to a point. The Bible says these sorcerers threw down their rods and they became serpents, **“but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods”** (Exodus 7:12). Somehow these sorcerers were enabled to make water into blood and to produce frogs on the land, but there was a limit to what they could do; after Aaron’s rod struck the dust and it became lice, the sorcerers were not able to duplicate this miracle and they had to give up. They told Pharaoh: **“This is the finger of God”** (Exodus 8:19).

God has never wanted His people to turn away from Him because of deceiving miracle-workers. Moses warned the Israelites: **“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”** (Deuteronomy 13:1-3). Likewise, Jesus warned His disciples: **“False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand”** (Matthew 24:24-25). In particular, the apostle Paul foretold that the coming of the great Antichrist (the papacy) **“is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved”** (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10).

Today many Christians, both true Christians and those who are Christians only in name, are entranced by the so-called charismatic or Pentecostal movement. The charismatic/Pentecostal movement claims that the signs and wonders done by the apostles are still being done regularly today through certain healers, tongue-speakers, and prophets. However, when the teaching of these charismatic leaders is compared with Scripture, we see that they are false teachers. The Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself. What is recorded in Scripture is from the Holy Spirit; we can depend on what the Bible says. We cannot, however, trust the sayings and deeds of someone who claims the Holy Spirit is speaking

and working through him if his teaching and practice does not agree with the Scriptures or goes beyond the Scriptures. God does His miracles as a part of His plan to save us, not for our entertainment or to satisfy our curiosity. Jesus did no miracles for King Herod who **“hoped to see some miracle done by Him”** (Luke 23:8).

John explained the main purpose of Jesus’ miracles: **“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name”** (John 20:30-31). The miracles done by the apostles in the early days of the Church also had a special purpose: **“They went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs”** (Mark 16:20). The purpose of the miracles they did was to confirm that they spoke God’s Word.

The purpose of the miracles in the apostolic era has been served. We now have the full apostolic witness in the Scriptures. There is no longer any need or expectation of ongoing Pentecostal or charismatic miracles in our time. The miracles recorded in Scripture are sufficient to confirm God’s message of salvation. **“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at 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?”** (Hebrews 2:3-4).

God wants us to call on Him in the day of trouble. In answer to our prayers God may work a miracle. That is, He may do something beyond the laws of nature. But most often God works within the laws of nature by providing healing and protection by ordinary means. In one sense, everything God does is a miracle, for He is the only One who can do it. Only God can create a world out of nothing. Only God has holy angels to do His bidding for the benefit of His people. Only God can create life through the natural means that only He has devised: through seeds and reproductive processes of His own design. He makes the wind blow and the earth shake. He makes the waters flow and He dries up the ground. Above all, only God can save sinful mankind, and He has chosen to do so through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through the working of the Holy Spirit, God creates faith in Christ and strengthen that faith to the end. Only God can carry out the great miracle of the end of the world, the universal resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. **“Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered”** (Psalm 40:5).

Questions

1. What is a miracle?
2. List five miracles that occurred in Old Testament times.
3. List five miracles that occurred in New Testament times.
4. Who is the only one who can perform a miracle?
5. Why must we be cautious concerning the claims of faith healers?
6. What were three periods in history when many miracles were performed?
7. Why did Joseph and Daniel give credit to God for interpretation of the dreams they interpreted?
8. Give some examples of signs and wonders done by false teachers.
9. What test should be given to all who claim to do wonders in Christ’s name?
10. What is the main purpose of the miracles recorded in the Bible?
11. Which charismatic groups are prevalent in your locale?
12. On what basis should these groups be evaluated?
13. In what sense can everything God does be called a miracle?
14. What are the usual ways in which God provides help for His people?