

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the providence of God. We have discussed his preserving and governing of his creation to bring about his purposes. Dr. Spencer, what do you want to examine today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to take a brief look at miracles. They belong in a discussion about God's providence because they are related to it as John Frame points out. He wrote that "God's 'extraordinary' actions are called miracles, and his 'ordinary' actions are called providence – although ... those are relative terms."¹

Marc Roby: Miracles can be a controversial topic among Christians today.

Dr. Spencer: And that's part of why I want to address it. It is an unnecessarily controversial topic. My purpose is to cause us all to think through our views on this topic biblically. We all, as modern people living in a western culture, tend to have serious prejudices with regard to the topic. So, the first thing we need to do is to define what a miracle is. And the minute we start to do that carefully we will begin to see the problem caused by our prejudices.

Marc Roby: Well, if I open my Webster's dictionary, I find the following definition for a miracle: it is "an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs."²

Dr. Spencer: That's a pretty common sort of definition, and we can immediately see that there is a problem from a biblical perspective because it talks about an event "manifesting divine intervention in human affairs." But, as we have been laboring to show in the past few sessions, God sustains and governs *all* of his creation, *all* of the time, to achieve his purposes, and this certainly includes *all* human affairs. From a proper biblical perspective, God intervenes in *every* event in this world, not just extremely rare events.

Marc Roby: I see your point, but it also seems reasonable to say that some events would manifest God's action more clearly than others would, and the definition does speak of "an extraordinary event", so we could assume that they had such events in mind.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, and I'm not saying this is a terrible definition, but it implicitly implies that God very rarely, if ever, intervenes in his creation. Even as Christians our worldviews are affected by the culture around us and we need to be careful to take note of that effect and to consciously cast off the influence when it is contrary to the Bible. If we think that there *any* events over which God is *not* in control, then our thinking is, to that extent, unbiblical. Remember Proverbs 16:33, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."³

¹ Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 275

² Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, G. & C. Merriam Comp., 1979

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John Frame does an excellent job discussing the subject of miracles in his book *The Doctrine of God*, and he mentions the “hermeneutical circle”⁴.

Marc Roby: I don’t recall us talking about that when we discussed hermeneutics.

Dr. Spencer: Well, that’s because we didn’t use that terminology. But the idea is very simple. If we want to develop a proper understanding of something, in this case miracles, we first try to clearly state what we think is true and then we look through the Bible to see whether or not what we have said is consistent with the whole teaching of the Bible. If it isn’t, we revise our statement and then go back through the Bible again. By repeatedly applying this procedure, which is the hermeneutical circle, we should come closer and closer to a proper biblical understanding.

Marc Roby: That’s a reasonable approach. So, how does he apply that to defining a miracle?

Dr. Spencer: He first points out that biblical Hebrew and Greek do not have words that correspond directly to our English word miracle. And, further, there are passages that clearly speak about miracles without using any of the nouns used in the Bible to describe miracles. Therefore, a word study is not a very good way to look for a biblical definition.

As just one quick example, let’s examine a passage that you might think is a clear-cut example of Jesus speaking about miracles. In John 14:11 we read that Jesus told the people, “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.” But, in the Greek, what Jesus said could more literally be translated as it is in the English Standard Version (ESV), which says, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.”

Marc Roby: And the Greek word Jesus used there, which the ESV has translated as works, that Greek word is ἔργον (ergon), from which we get our word ergonomic, which is the science of making things so that people can work efficiently and safely. So Jesus may not even have been referring exclusively to miracles.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And the other Greek words translated in our NIV Bibles as miracle are words whose root meanings are power (δύναμις), sign (σημεῖον), or wonder (τέρας). Certainly, miracles in the Bible are used as signs to point to God’s power and to authenticate his prophets, his Messiah, and his apostles.

But, as I said, Frame argues that a word study isn’t a great place to start. Instead, he proposes a definition and then examines several popular modifications or improvements that might be suggested. His initial proposal for a biblical definition is that “miracles are unusual events caused by God’s power, so extraordinary that we would usually consider them impossible.”⁵

⁴ Frame, op. cit., pg. 245

⁵ Ibid, pp 245-246

Marc Roby: That sounds reasonable. What modifications to this definition does he go on to consider?

Dr. Spencer: The first is the common idea that a miracle is, to quote the philosopher David Hume, “a violation of the laws of nature.” Frame first points out that there is a problem with using the word “violation” here. God created this universe and, as Creator, he has authority to do with it what he pleases. It is, therefore, impossible for him to violate the very laws that he himself established. If he created them, he certainly has authority to suspend, alter or do away with them as he pleases. But, even if you choose a different word, the idea that a miracle must somehow be an exception to natural law is a common idea.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is certainly one of the common ways you hear people speak about miracles, if they speak about them at all.

Dr. Spencer: It is, but Frame rejects this modification to the definition for four reasons. First, the Bible itself never indicates that this is what constitutes a miracle.

Marc Roby: That would seem to be sufficient reason to reject the idea all by itself.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should be. The second reason he gives for rejecting this modification to the definition is that there are no natural laws that operate independently of God. He writes that “The idea of a mechanism between God and creation that administers the universe in the absence of divine intervention is a deistic, rather than a biblical, model.”⁶ When he says this, he is certainly *not* denying the existence of natural laws that we can discover and put to use in all sorts of ways. Science, as we have noted before, is enabled by the fact that God upholds the laws he has created, but the key idea here is that God upholds those laws. They are not independent of him.

Marc Roby: We spoke last time about the Bible’s clear teaching that God is in control of the rain.

Dr. Spencer: And Frame uses the same example, but there are obviously many more. Now his third reason for rejecting this idea is that no one knows all of the physical laws God has established perfectly and, therefore, no could identify for certain what is, or is not, a miracle.

Marc Roby: And if we couldn’t clearly identify an event as a miracle, that would prohibit it from being a useful sign, which the Bible itself tells us is one purpose of miracles as we saw a few moments ago from John 14:11.

Dr. Spencer: You’re right, if we can’t identify when something is a miracle, it can’t function as a sign at all. In fact, I think this reason is again, by itself, a compelling reason to not add that restriction to the definition. Just suppose, for example, that we someday discover how to control gravity and we can make something akin to the hoverboard in the *Back to the Future* movies. Would that in any way negate the impact that Jesus’ walking on the water had on his disciples?

Marc Roby: I don’t think so.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 250

Dr. Spencer: And neither do I. We can do things now that would almost certainly have been considered miraculous by virtually anyone at the time of Christ. Just consider jet airplanes, cell phones, and GPS systems as a few examples.

Marc Roby: It is impossible to imagine how someone of that time would have reacted, but I'm quite sure that you're right in saying that most would have called them miraculous.

Dr. Spencer: The idea is fertile ground for science fiction novels and movies, but clearly something does not have to suspend the normal laws of our universe to be a useful sign. Now getting back to the topic at hand, Frame's fourth reason for rejecting this addition is also compelling. It is that the Bible itself gives us examples of events that have clear "natural" explanations but are, nonetheless, miraculous in any meaningful sense of that term.

Marc Roby: Such as?

Dr. Spencer: Such as the parting of the Red Sea. In Exodus 14:21 we read, "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land." There is no suspension of natural law in having a strong east wind, but it is certainly miraculous that it came exactly when Moses stretched out his hand.

Marc Roby: And it may very well have also required a suspension of the normal laws of physics for it to heap up the water on both sides of a path the way it did.

Dr. Spencer: That may be true, the strong east wind may not have been a sufficient cause. But there is at least some possibility that given a very specific geographic situation it was. So, I think Frame's four reasons are more than adequate for rejecting this modification to the definition of a miracle, we should not in any way reference natural laws in our definition.

Marc Roby: What other possible modifications does Frame consider?

Dr. Spencer: He rejects the suggestion made by some that a miracle involves the *immediate* activity of God. And the word immediate here is not being used in the temporal sense, in other words it does not mean activity that occurs right away. Rather, it refers to activity that is not mediated by some secondary agent.

Marc Roby: That again is a very common idea about what constitutes a miracle.

Dr. Spencer: It is, but I think Frame's reasons for rejecting it are sound. He points out that the Bible itself doesn't distinguish between events in which God acts immediately or mediately. It is fairly obvious, as he notes, that the original creation out of nothing must have been an immediate act of God. After all, who or what could have mediated when nothing but God existed? He also posits, and I would certainly agree, that regeneration, or new birth, must be an immediate work of God. But what other events can we say that about with any degree of certainty?

Marc Roby: Well, I would say the virginal conception of Jesus, but I wouldn't want to try and give an exhaustive list such events.

Dr. Spencer: Nor would I. Therefore, Frame points out two problems here. First, he writes, “If miracles are immediate acts of God, how could anybody ever identify an event as a miracle?”⁷ And secondly, as we have been discussing for several weeks, God upholds all of creation, so in a sense, absolutely *nothing* occurs without his immediate action, at least in the sense of upholding the creation. As Paul said in Acts 17:28, “For in him we live and move and have our being.”

Marc Roby: Yes, that is, again, a compelling argument. Does Frame consider any other additions to the definition?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he considers one more. It is that a miracle must somehow be used to attest to the authenticity of a prophet of God.

Marc Roby: That idea is certainly present in Scripture. I think of the story about Jesus telling a paralytic that his sins were forgiven. Some of the people in the crowd starting thinking to themselves that Jesus was committing blasphemy because only God has authority to forgive sins, and then we read in Matthew 9:5-6 that Jesus said to them, “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... Then he said to the paralytic, ‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’” So, Jesus himself used that miracle to attest to his authority.

Dr. Spencer: You’re quite right, and Frame notes that this idea is biblical, but the problem is that not *every* miracle in the Bible has that purpose, so it shouldn’t be part of the definition of a miracle. Frame notes, for example, that the flood at the time of Noah was intended for judgment, not as a validation of Noah as a prophet.

Marc Roby: Very well, so what is Frame’s final conclusion?

Dr. Spencer: First recall that his preliminary definition was that “miracles are unusual events caused by God’s power, so extraordinary that we would usually consider them impossible.” And he rejected any of the additions that would normally be proposed. Therefore, there is a close link between miracles and providence, which is why we are considering miracles now. God rules as the sovereign Lord of the universe in both the miraculous and the ordinary. But Frame thinks, and I certainly agree, that it is still useful to distinguish between the two. Therefore, he slightly amends his preliminary definition to explicitly mention God’s relationship to creation as the covenant Lord and concludes by saying that “Miracles are extraordinary manifestations of God’s covenant lordship.”⁸

Marc Roby: That strikes me as a perfectly reasonable and biblical definition to work with.

Dr. Spencer: And I again agree. But Frame then addresses an issue that is controversial in the modern church. And that is the question of whether or not miracles occur today.

⁷ Ibid, pg. 253

⁸ Ibid, pg. 258

Marc Roby: There are many modern Christians who would say that miracles ended with the end of the apostolic age.

Dr. Spencer: Many do say that. And before we go any further, I want to be clear that this is not in any way an essential of the faith. Born-again believers can disagree on this issue. But, with that said, let's very briefly consider the question.

And let me begin by saying that there are a couple of non-negotiable items. One of them is that the canon of Scripture is closed. Whatever we may believe concerning God's revealing things to individual Christians, there is no new revelation on a par with Scripture. It alone is the ultimate authority for a Christian.

Marc Roby: And so, for example, the Roman Catholic idea that the traditions of the church are on the same level as Scripture is wrong.

Dr. Spencer: And so are the Mormons when they claim that God gave new revelation to Joseph Smith. The entire Old Testament pointed forward in a myriad of ways to the coming Messiah, who was promised to Adam and Eve in the garden immediately after the fall.⁹ The New Testament tells us about the coming of this Messiah, what he taught personally and through his apostles, and it also tells us about the early history of the church. After that, God's infallible revelation to man ended.

Marc Roby: And so, at a bare minimum, any guidance anyone thinks he receives from the Holy Spirit must be consistent with the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. We are told in 1 John 4:1 that we are to test the spirits.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right. The Holy Spirit is the unchangeable God. If someone thinks that God has revealed something to him that contradicts God's word given to us in the Bible, he is wrong.

The other non-negotiable item is that no one is given authority to perform miracles at will. There are many charlatans out there who will pretend that they can heal you of your diseases or provide some desired benefit on demand. But that is a lie.

Marc Roby: Alright, I agree with those two non-negotiable items. What then do you want to say about miracles occurring now?

Dr. Spencer: I think that God is clearly capable of doing miracles at any time, that there is no clear teaching in the Bible to indicate that he stopped performing miracles at the end of the apostolic age. There is also a lot of very credible evidence for God performing miracles of healing and so on in our day and age. For one thing, I would say that every time a person is born again, that is a miracle.

Marc Roby: And praise God for that miracle.

⁹ See Genesis 3:15

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. Without it, no one would be saved. But, in addition, God still provides for the needs of his church. And those needs did not end with the death of the last apostle. God calls us to approach his throne of grace with confidence. We are to pray for our needs and the needs of others. And prayer works. Including, sometimes, miraculous healing or miraculous provisions.

God is not a vending machine and we don't have the power to cause him to do whatever we want, his answer to a prayer for healing may be "no", as it was, for example, for the apostle Paul.¹⁰ But God does still perform miracles for his people, although I agree with Frame that they are rare today. We are told that we shouldn't look for them as confirmation of our faith because we have a sufficient basis for our faith without them. But they occur even today. We have a mighty God.

Marc Roby: I think that is a wonderful note to end on for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we'll do our best to respond to them.

¹⁰ See 2 Corinthians 12:1-10