

“Two Kinds of Faith for Two Kinds of Miracles”

Luke 17:11-19

2 Cor. 12:1-10

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Many years ago, I worked as a chaplain in a large hospital. Being a hospital chaplain is not an easy task: the sadness and tragedy that one encounters in a hospital can be overwhelming. Trying to be a minister of the gospel in that context is especially challenging. There's one experience in particular that troubled me greatly and I want to share it with you this morning.

One day as I was making the rounds in the surgical intensive care unit, I met a man whose wife was recovering from surgery. He was very glad to see the chaplain because, as he explained to me, he was a Bible-believing Christian. He told me the grim news that the doctors had opened up his wife's abdomen and concluded that she had an inoperable form of cancer. But even though his wife's diagnosis was virtually hopeless, this man assured me that he wasn't worried at all. He wasn't worried because he knew that God was going to perform a miracle to save his wife in spite of the fact that the doctors had already given up hope for her. As I kept listening to him, I realized that the real reason he was glad to see the chaplain was because he wanted me to promise him that, yes, God really was going to cure his wife by a miracle. And though he was trying to convince me that he wasn't worried, I could see that he was deeply worried. In fact, he was more than worried; he was terrified that he was going to lose his wife.

I knew I was in a bind. I didn't know what to say. As the chaplain, I wanted to offer him encouragement and assurance. I wanted to strengthen his faith in God. After all, that was my task. In such a stressful and frightening circumstance as a serious illness that lands one in the

hospital, a chaplain seeks to provide the reassurance of God's love and care to those in distress. At the same time, however, I knew I couldn't promise him that God was going to give his wife the miracle he wanted. How could I? I couldn't predict what was going to happen. And I certainly didn't want to tie his faith in God to his hope for a miracle. What if his wife died? Would he lose his faith in God altogether if he didn't get the miracle he was counting on?

Now, who of us can say that miracles never happen? We live in such a vast and infinitely complex world and none of us is really in a position to deny that miracles are possible. Not even scientists can rule out the miraculous. William Shakespeare made this point long ago in a famous line uttered by Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." I think that's right. Recently at our Monday morning Bible study, John Brown shared that in his experience as a physician he had known of patients who made a completely unexpected recovery for which there was no medical explanation of why they had recovered. When I was at the deathbed of my friend Bruce a few weeks ago, I prayed for a miracle and so did his wife Lisa. Who's to say that miracles are impossible? Who's to say that we shouldn't hope and pray for them? Why shouldn't that man I met in the hospital have hoped that God would miraculously heal his wife? Why shouldn't Lisa have prayed for a miracle?

And yet we don't always get the miracles we hope and pray for. That's a sad fact of life and often it comes as such a deep disappointment that it is hard for our faith in God to recover from it. Sometimes we even feel betrayed by God. That's why it's difficult to be a hospital chaplain. While chaplains are there to strengthen people's faith in God, good chaplains want people to have the kind of faith in God that can help them to weather the storms of life, including those times when we feel disappointed and perhaps even betrayed by God.

When facing difficult and perplexing situations, I often turn to the Bible to see what help and wisdom I can find there. And what I found there when facing this particular situation surprised me and it may surprise you too. It turns out that the writers of the New Testament gave serious thought to these questions. What we learn there is that the New Testament distinguishes between two types of faith. One is a faith in miracles. The other is faith in Christ, with or without miracles. There are two passages in particular that can help us to put these questions about faith and miracles in a new perspective. One comes from the Gospel of Luke and the other from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. Let's explore these passages together.

In the text from Luke, we have a miracle story. Ten lepers beg Jesus to heal them of their leprosy. Indeed, they turn to Jesus because he has a reputation as a miracle worker. Wherever he went, people sought miracles from him. So too these lepers come, asking that he take pity on them and cure them. In reply, Jesus instructs them to go to the temple and to present themselves to the priest for examination, since it was the priest's duty to ascertain that the leper had been cleansed or cured of leprosy (Lev. 14). And as they are on their way to the temple, they are healed of the disease. They received from Jesus the miracle they had requested. Everything's back to normal for them. Now they can get on with their lives again. And that's what they did.

In and of itself, the healing was miraculous. Their faith in Jesus as a miracle worker had been vindicated. But then Luke tells us that one of them sees that he has been healed and returns to Jesus, falling at his feet and giving thanks and praising God. He is a Samaritan, and not a Jew as are the other nine. Since he is not a Jew, he couldn't avail himself of the temple's ritual procedures for declaring lepers cleansed. And so, he alone returns to Jesus. Jesus thus draws a contrast between him and the others: "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" Then Jesus dismisses the Samaritan, saying: "Get up and go on your way." But

immediately following this is a sentence that can be translated from Greek into English in two different ways. The first translation is what we find in our pew Bibles: “Your faith has made you well” (NRSV). The second translation is: “Your faith has saved you.” The translation problem arises from the fact that the Greek word in this verse can be translated as both “heal” and “save.” Hence, the verse can mean either “Your faith has healed you” or “Your faith has saved you.”

If we opt for the first translation “Your faith has made you well,” then Jesus is referring to the healing miracle. His meaning would be: “Because you believed that I could heal you of your disease, you were healed.” This would be faith in Jesus as a miracle worker. The rest of the story would then be understood as a criticism of the other nine for not having thanked Jesus for the miracle he had performed for them. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that it implies that if only we had enough faith, Jesus would perform miracles for all of us. “Your faith has made you well” means: “you got the miracle you asked for because you really believed I could do it.” But as we will see in Second Corinthians, not receiving a miracle isn’t necessarily due to our lack of faith. So maybe the text from Luke means something else.

Indeed, the second translation makes more sense. The meaning is then: “Your faith has saved you, or you have been saved by faith.” In this case, the point of the story is to illustrate the contrast between faith in Jesus as a miracle worker and faith in Jesus as the savior. According to this interpretation of the story, all ten lepers were the recipient of a miracle, but only one of them became a Christian and was saved. All ten were healed, but only one of them was converted.

Indeed, Luke tells us that the Samaritan “saw” that he had been healed. Now surely the other nine also saw that they had been healed, so Luke must mean something more here when he says that the Samaritan “saw that he was healed.” Consequently, this is not a mere seeing with the eyes that Luke is talking about, but a seeing of the heart. In other words, what the Samaritan

saw was that he was saved by God's grace. The healing miracle became the occasion for him to realize the most important truth about his life: that he is a child of God. Once the Samaritan sees this, he sees his life in an entirely new perspective. Now he has a completely new understanding of himself in the world and in relation to God. Luke tells us that he gave glory to God.

Accordingly, he is not merely healed of his disease; he is also saved. He is saved by his faith in God's grace that he encountered through Jesus. We could say that he has been the recipient of two miracles, not just one. He has been both healed and saved. Whereas he first had faith in Jesus as a miracle worker, now he has faith in Jesus as his savior also. He got the healing miracle he asked for, yet he was also converted to Christian faith since he experienced the miracle of God's grace through Jesus. Luke's purpose, then, is to distinguish faith in miracles from genuine Christian faith in Jesus. Anyone can receive a miracle but this doesn't change their heart the way a conversion does. A miracle allows you to return to your old life as just as it was before; by contrast, a conversion is the start of a completely new life for you in relation to God.

The conversion is no less miraculous than the healing but it is more important, and this is Luke's point. Now the Samaritan lives with a new understanding of his life in the world because of his experience of God's grace. This new understanding of his life is called "faith." And the result of a life lived in faith is called "salvation." This faith saves us regardless of the external circumstances of our lives: whether we are lepers or cleansed, whether we are Jews or Samaritans, whether we are sick or healthy. For although the other nine lepers were healed, they were not saved. Unlike the Samaritan, they missed out on the most important moment of their lives. In regarding Jesus merely as a miracle worker, they failed to see what the Samaritan saw in Jesus, namely, the bearer of salvation, the one who leads us to an internal change within our hearts whereby we can endure all things bravely because we have been given the gift of faith in

God's grace. Although the other nine received a miracle that changed the external circumstances of their lives, their hearts remained unchanged. The other nine could be reintegrated into their old lives. The healing miracle made it possible for them to live life again as they always had before. But for the Samaritan it was different. Now he saw that the healing was a sign of God's grace. And he realized that through faith, that is, through trust in God's grace, we find our salvation as human beings. Henceforth, his life would be completely different: He praised God!

Luke told this story about Jesus and the lepers because he wanted to teach an important theological lesson about the difference between a mere faith in miracles and faith in the miracle of God's grace. If we had the time to examine all the other relevant passages in the New Testament, we'd see that the same point is being made elsewhere too. So, let me briefly mention just a few of them. When the disciples of Jesus are asked "by what power or by what name" they are able to perform miracles, the question implies that miracle workers are a dime a dozen (Acts 4:7). Since miracle workers were common in the ancient world, just as common as televangelists are today, it is not surprising Jesus' opponents did not doubt that he could perform miracles; yet they suspected that his miraculous powers came from Satan, "the prince of demons," not from God (Matt. 12:24). They had no doubts that he could perform a miracle, but they didn't believe his power to be derived from God. This means that, taken by itself, a miracle is no proof that we are dealing with God. Miracles are ambiguous. When doubting Thomas wanted to see proof of Jesus' resurrection, Jesus said to him, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29). Thomas wanted proof of the miracle before he would believe that Jesus was alive; by contrast, Jesus praised the faith that does not require miraculous proof. Clearly, then, the New Testament writers understood that it is possible to believe in miracles without having Christian faith in Jesus as savior, that it's possible to be the recipient of

a miracle that changes the external circumstances of one's life without being converted, without having one's heart changed. Being granted a miracle is not the same thing as being saved. But they also knew that it is possible to have authentic Christian faith in God's grace without being the recipient of a miracle. Just as a miracle is no proof that God is at work, so too genuine faith in God is no guarantee of a miracle.

The apostle Paul tells us of a time when his prayer for a miracle went unanswered. Or, more precisely, his prayer was answered but it was not the answer he had been hoping for. This is a very interesting and important passage for our question. Here in Second Corinthians Paul had been boasting of a special revelation he was granted. Although speaking of himself in the third person ("I know of a person...who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven"), his boasting is ironic. He knows that he's not supposed to boast; elsewhere he tells us that whoever boasts should boast in the Lord (2 Cor. 10:17; cf. Jer. 9:24). Yet Paul is contending with other Christians who've been boasting of their supernatural powers and abilities, including revelations, speaking in tongues, and miracles. Paul calls them "super-apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5). These Christians who boast of their supernatural abilities looked down on Paul because he couldn't bring forth the same impressive list of miraculous credentials that they have to their credit. I remember how as a teen-ager I met some Christians like these "super-apostles" who thought that the rest of us ordinary Christians weren't in a right relationship with God because we lacked miraculous powers. If I had had the gift of speaking in tongues, for instance, then I would have had the proof that I was a real Christian, or at least a serious Christian and not a mere babe in the Lord. To their way of thinking, any of us who had real faith would be the recipients of this kind of miracle. Back then, I was ashamed by my weak faith in comparison with theirs and I remember wishing that my faith could be as strong as theirs; but now, looking back on it, I

only wish that then I had understood the New Testament as well as I do now so I wouldn't have been so easily misled by those super-Christians into thinking that my faith was deficient because I didn't have any miracles to show for myself! Now I have to ask: Did any of these super-Christians ever read our passage from 2 Corinthians? If so, did they get Paul's point?

In the face of such Christians, Paul makes fun of their boasting by boasting a bit himself. He reports that he too has had a revelation, in which he had been taken up to heaven and that he heard mysterious things there he dares not utter. That's certainly rather impressive! But then suddenly, he turns the tables on these proud and boastful super-apostles by telling them he is now going to boast of being weak and that this boast is far more important than boasting of any revelation he has had: "I will boast all the more of my weaknesses." Boasting of weakness? What could that possibly mean? Who boasts of weakness? What kind of nonsense is this?

Paul explains that he had been afflicted with some kind of physical ailment which he calls "a thorn in the flesh." He says that he asked the Lord to remove it three times, but instead of granting Paul his desire, the only answer he got in response was: "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>1</sup> This is remarkable. Paul is admitting that he is just like the rest of us who have ever prayed for a miracle that never occurred. And yet he is boasting in this fact! Why? How can he boast in not having received a miracle? As I said, he's turning the tables on those Christians who boast of their supposedly superior relationship to God on account of miracles and other supernatural abilities. You see, Paul wants us to learn a different lesson, namely, that genuine Christian faith is faith in God even apart from miracles: "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness." Paul goes on to

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<sup>1</sup> See the textual variant.



say: “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Imagine that God had denied your request for a miracle and then you go around boasting about it! It sounds silly, doesn't it? But Paul is not really boasting; he's trying to show that genuine Christian faith is not so much faith in miracles as it is trust in God's grace whatever the external circumstances of our lives may be: “My grace is sufficient for you. Therefore, I am content...for when I am weak, then I am strong.” Indeed, to live with faith in God's grace is a miracle all its own, yet it's a miracle that changes our inner lives even when our external circumstances remain the same. That's why Paul can say he's is content with weakness, insults, hardships, calamities, etc. He's been given the power to face life on its own terms, however difficult this might be, knowing that he is supremely confident of God's grace toward him.

The German Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, who came to this country as an immigrant fleeing from the Nazis, had this to say about the miracle of faith in God's grace: “Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage.” That's what Paul was saying. In the face of his thorn in the flesh, he experienced the sufficiency of God's grace. Bruce's wife Lisa sent me a message last Sunday after attending church with us. I think she too is saying much the same thing that Tillich was saying. Here are her words: “Please send my love to the wonderful people in your church. I have to say I am feeling the prayers of everyone who is praying for me. Please let everyone know that I appreciate the prayers. Today I have had many lows but many highs too. I'm realizing that Bruce isn't coming back and I'm asking God, ‘Why take Bruce? He had so much

to give and he cared so much for so many.’ But of course, lots of people die every day. Good people and bad people. I have a lot of questions for God, but don’t expect any answers. I’m feeling so sad today. I believe God has a plan but I am mad at him. I do think that is OK. I keep talking to God and asking for strength. And these are just the early days. The journey is going to be a long one. Thank you for being there. We can pray for each other.” Here is someone who, like the apostle Paul, prayed for a miracle but didn’t get the miracle she wanted. And now she is trying to face her circumstances, not having given up her faith in God even though it’s being severely tested. She admits she’s mad at God, but also thinks it’s ok for her to be mad at God. She asks why Bruce had to die, but then realizes that Bruce isn’t the only good person who’s died prematurely and tragically. And even though she doesn’t expect God to give any answers to her questions, she says: “I believe God has a plan.” She keeps talking to God and asking for strength, knowing that she has a long hard road ahead of her. This is similar to Paul saying, “God’s grace is sufficient for me.” And because God’s grace is sufficient, Lisa can face all that she has to go through in spite of the fact that the miracle she had prayed for didn’t occur.

There are so many times when I’ve prayed to God for a miracle to change the external circumstances of my life. But I have to confess that I’ve never been the recipient of this kind of miracle. Other people have told me that God has bestowed such miracles upon them and I’m happy for them. But looking back at my life, I am no longer sad that I didn’t get the miracles I asked for. Faith in miracles is one thing; but faith in God’s grace is another. God’s grace, too, is a miracle. But it’s not the kind of miracle that makes our lives easy. Rather, it’s the kind of miracle that makes it possible to face the challenges and difficulties of life with courage, joy, hope, and confidence. As Paul says elsewhere: “We rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

and hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5). God's grace is another name for God's love. The miracle of faith in God's grace is no quick fix to the problems each of us faces in our lives. But it's what makes it possible for us to face all these problems that beset us. It's what makes it possible for us to say with the apostle Paul: "I am content with weaknesses...for when I am weak, then I am strong." We, too, can learn to boast of our weakness.

The woman whose husband I met in a hospital when I was working as a chaplain did end up dying of cancer as the doctors had predicted. She did not get the miracle that her husband had assured me God was going to provide. I hope he didn't lose his faith in God out of disappointment that God had let him down. All of us suffer disappointment and tragedy. But that doesn't mean God is not gracious and loving. The miracle of genuine Christian faith in God is the confidence that life is worth living in spite of all the suffering, loss, grief, and sorrow we experience.

If, like the ten lepers we too are fortunate enough to be recipients of the kind of a miracle that changes our external circumstances, that's terrific; but in this case, may we be like the Samaritan who not only received a miracle but also was converted because he realized that he can now live by faith in the miracle of God's grace. If, however, like the apostle Paul, we are not fortunate enough to be the recipients of the kind of miracle that changes our external circumstances, may we be like Paul who accepted that God's grace is enough.