

Not long ago, a preacher from a church that regularly handles snakes as part of their religious services, and who was also somewhat of a television celebrity, died from a snake bite. Many people are fascinated by this kind of activity because it is done in the name of religion – in particular, Christianity. So this morning I intend to ask and begin to answer the question, “Does the Bible really teach that Christians should handle snakes?” Is that part of the Christian faith? Turn with us to the New Testament book of Luke 7, and we’ll have a Scripture reading in just a moment.

[INTRO]

Now, if you have your Bible ready with the New Testament book of Luke 7, let’s begin reading in verse 20:

And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, **"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."** (Luke 7:20-22, ESV).

Although the circumstances of the verses are very interesting, that’s not what we’re going to focus on for our lesson today. And in fact, I’m not going to fully answer the question about snake handling in this lesson either. Now, I promise you, if I live, and the Lord wills, we’ll air the study of the passage that deals with snake handling in our very next lesson. But first, we need some background study on the concept of biblical miracles. So let’s begin by going back to that reading from Luke 7:20-22.

What we’re going to focus on are the things Jesus listed in verse 22. Let’s listen to them again, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up...”

In order for us to answer the question, “Have Miracles Ceased?”, we must first understand and define what a biblical miracle is. One way we can do that is to look at a passage like this, where Jesus talks about some of the miracles He was doing. Blind people receiving their sight, people afflicted with leprosy being cured, deaf people becoming able to hear – these are all examples of the miracles Jesus performed in His ministry.

But perhaps we’ve become so accustomed to these phrases that we don’t really pay attention to what they actually involve. For example, think with me about blind people receiving their sight. Here we are, 2,000 years removed from the ministry of Jesus, and we are the beneficiaries of some unbelievable technological advancements. Yet, with all that, we cannot take a person who is blind from birth, as Jesus did on occasion, and give that person the ability to see. Of course, you’ve probably heard of, or even had, Lasik surgery. It is an amazing advancement in the field of vision, but it’s not a miracle. It’s amazing. It’s life-changing, but it’s not a miracle. To this today, nobody is doing what Jesus was doing 2,000 years ago – not even close. The miracles of Jesus involved an

instantaneous restoring of the body to a state of wholeness with no human intervention or manipulation of any kind. Big difference. Lasik surgery is amazing, but it's not a miracle, at least not by the Bible's definition.

So again, think with me now about the things Jesus was doing, restoring sight and hearing, cleansing lepers, raising the dead – are these things happening anywhere in the world today? Not in the way Jesus was doing them. There are still people afflicted with leprosy to this day. Today it is usually called “Hansen’s Disease.” There is still no cure. Hansen’s Disease is essentially a disorder of the body’s nervous system. Nerve endings become dead and can no longer properly convey the idea of pain or sensitivity to cold, heat, touch, pressure, and so on. That may sound good at first, but if our skin does not convey the message to the brain that there is a problem, it is much more prone to injury. As a result, the skin is constantly scraped and injured and bruised, and over the years, whole fingers and toes and such can become completely worn away because there is no sensitivity, and the body does not repair itself. It was believed by many people that this body-altering disease was contagious – which, by the way, it is not – and that people who had it were being punished by God. The Old Testament Law required such people to be exiled from the rest of the population, and to be considered “unclean.” Israel was never told to mistreat them in any way, but they were to remain separated from them.

Now listen carefully: Jesus walked right up to these kind of people and not only touched them, but made them “whole” again. Not through therapy or treatment or medical advancement or surgery or any other intervention – but by simply saying so. That, my friends, is the description of a biblical miracle. So again, I would ask you, “Are there genuine, biblical miracles happening today?”

Through the years, I have watched televangelists claim that they were performing miracles on people. But you know what? I’ve never seen or witnessed anything like what I read about in the Bible. I’ve never seen someone of leprosy instantaneously cured. I’m going to guess you haven’t either. I’ve never seen anyone resurrected from the dead. My guess is that you haven’t either. I’ve never seen anyone walk on water. Have you?

Oh, there have been plenty of people who claim to heal headaches or backaches, or cancers, or to shrink tumors, or to survive accidents that they shouldn’t survive. I was watching something on television not long ago about two brothers who were window cleaners on this big building in New York. Somehow, the mechanism that holds them up broke, and they fell something like 47 stories. One brother died instantly, the other is alive and only had minor injuries. His wife was interviewed not long after and she said, and I quote, “Thank God for the miracle that we had.” Folks, there is no doubt in my mind that she is ecstatic her husband didn’t die. And there is no doubt in my mind that it is but by the grace of God that this man is alive. But with great understanding and kindness, I tell you, it wasn’t a miracle at all – at least, not a biblical one.

If we define miracle in the common cultural sense – which is obviously the sense in which this grateful woman would define it – then indeed, this man was saved by a miracle. But that’s if we define it as our culture now uses it. I don’t have to tell you that from my generation back to my dad’s generation, who was born in the late 40’s, the word “gay” has changed *dramatically* in meaning. The word simply doesn’t mean the same thing anymore, does it? And so has the word “miracle” from what the translators of the English Bible first intended, to how people use it today. People use the word miracle to describe anything that is stunning, difficult to be done, not easily explained, and so on. We describe birth as a miracle. But truly, birth is not a miracle. A miracle is

something that operates on a law higher than the laws of nature. Birth is completely natural. It is amazing! It is a powerful thing for sure, but it is not a miracle. It does not transcend nature – it is nature!

Likewise, someone surviving an accident is not a miracle. It may be crazy, it may be hard to explain, it may be impossible to explain, but it is not a biblical miracle. It happens, and it happens fairly regularly. A man falls 47 stories and lives – it is amazing indeed! But it is not a miracle. In fact, it was found out later than the man's brother, who died, was thrown from the cage in which they were standing, and was killed. The brother who lived remained in the cage, which descended between two buildings. As it neared the ground, it became wedged between the two buildings and slowed down dramatically as the metal folded around him. It became like a roll cage in a stock car. He was almost perfectly preserved like a little egg in a shell. Now, what are the chances that would ever happen just like that again? Almost zero. But is it a miracle? Does it transcend nature? Not at all. Everything acted in accord with natural laws of gravity and physics and matter and time. It was just a lucky break for him, and a not-so-lucky break for his brother. It was no more a miracle that he lived than it was a miracle that his brother died. Both were just odd and very unusual circumstances.

Which brings me to a very important point: saying that what people call miracles today and what the Bible describes as a miracle are two very different things does not mean I believe that God is now powerless to do such things, or that He has lost His power today. I've heard people say, "You don't believe that God can do...X,Y,Z?" Not at all! Much to the contrary! I am not saying that at all. God can do absolutely anything that is consistent with His nature, and He is at liberty to defy or suspend or supersede or trump any natural law He wishes. He created these laws, He is certainly at liberty to do as He wishes. If you think about it, God's very existence is a violation of natural law. He is *supernatural*. But that's not the point. It's not a matter of what God *can* do, it is a matter of what He *chooses* to do.

And beyond that, we are not at liberty to state more about God than He revealed to us in Scripture. There is no doubt that God can do things we couldn't even begin to imagine. But the reason we know that God is not doing Bible-type miracles today is because He has revealed to us that the duration of miracles was to be for a specific purpose, and for a specific period of time. And we will take the time in our next lesson to talk about that very thing.

[CONCLUSION]

Scriptures Used/referenced in this lesson:

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Sources Used:

(1978) New King James Bible. Thomas Nelson, Nashville.

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

Hear The Gospel (Rom. 10:17)

Confess Faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 8:24; Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 8:37)

Repent of Sin (Mt. 10:32-33; Lk. 13:3-5)

Be Baptized (Immersed) For the Forgiveness of Sins (Mk. 16:15-16; Acts 2:38)

Life Faithfully (Rev. 2:10)