

Introduction:

1. Let us begin our study with the assumption we all believe in prayer. Do we assume too much?
 - a. We certainly cannot make that assumption about mankind as a whole.
 - b. We cannot even make that assumption about all Christians.
2. Indeed, some professing believers hold that it is useless to pray. Here are some of their reasons:
 - a. “If God is doing something, then it automatically involves a miracle.” This is followed by, “Since the age of miracles has passed, God is not doing anything today.”
 - b. “Prayer was only for the time of spiritual gifts—and spiritual gifts have ceased.”
 - c. “Since God already knows the future, that means the future is already set. It is fixed, and no amount of prayer can change it.”
 - d. Holding these views, it is easy to see why some people would not pray.
3. On the other hand, there are those who point to Daniel 2:20-21. They believe God is in charge of the world and *can do* whatsoever He wills—and *does* what He wills. Is that where you stand?
 - a. But even among those who believe God is active and that He does answer prayer, there is the question of “how?” What do we know about *how* God answers prayer?
 - b. This prompts us to study “Prayer, Miracles, and the Providence of God.”

The Lesson:

I. It is critical that we define the terms “miracle” and “providence.”

- A. We don’t need to define prayer, having done that in an earlier study. It is to talk to God, making requests of God, etc. God speaks to us in His word. We speak to Him in prayer. Simple.
- B. But it is critical to define and distinguish between a miracle from God and the providence of God. A failure to make that distinction leads to confusion. How would you define our terms?
- C. Miracle.
 1. We must define miracle in the context of God and the Bible. That is imperative because our culture defines the word very broadly and loosely. Contemporary use applies it to chance occurrences, to anything that surprises us, or generally to any remarkable thing for which we have no explanation (even computers). Some examples:
 - a. When the 1980 U.S. Hockey team won the gold medal it was called, “Miracle on Ice.”
 - b. When a child is born, we speak of “the miracle of birth.” Amazing, but a miracle?
 - c. This week we saw an incredible incident in New York City. It was called “Miracle on the Hudson.” This incident is a perfect example of how we misuse “miracle.” A plane landing on water with no loss of life is an astounding, amazing, astonishing event. I have no problem even giving thanks to God for such an outcome, but “a miracle”?
 - d. None of the things just mentioned are miracles—in spite of insistence otherwise.
 2. Biblically, a miracle is a supernatural act; the intervention of God in a way that is above natural law; it transcends and is contrary to natural law. (The plane incident on the Hudson doesn’t qualify under that definition.) Some examples of miracles:
 - a. Moses miraculously caused the Red Sea to part, Exodus 14:21. No amount of stretching one’s hand over the sea will ever cause it to part naturally. This was a miracle.
 - b. Jesus walked on water, John 6:19. That was a supernatural act; it was above natural law; it was even contrary to natural law. The laws of nature say that a man will sink if he tries to walk on water. We learn that before we are age two.
 - c. Peter miraculously raised Dorcas from the dead, Acts 9:36-41. No amount of kneeling and praying of itself will cause the dead to come to life. This required a miracle. God had given men like the Apostle Peter miraculous powers to perform such miracles.
- D. Providence.
 1. Our English word “providence” is Latin in origin. It is from the terms “pro-video,” to “before-see,” or to “see before.” It involves seeing a need or a desired outcome and arranging things to meet that need or produce that outcome.
 - a. The providence of God is the provision and activity of God to produce a certain outcome. Though God acts, it does not require any miraculous action on God’s part.
 - b. Have you ever pre-arranged something to produce a desired outcome? Of course you have. We do it all the time; it requires no miracle. If we can do it, why can’t God?

2. Remember Daniel 2:20-21. God is in control of nations and affairs of men and does whatsoever He wills, Daniel 4:35; Luke 1:37. Is it impossible for God to work without a miracle?
- E. Now that we have defined our terms, we need to look at some examples of each.

II. Examples of “miracles” contrasted with “providence.”

- A. With respect to God defeating evil nations.
 1. An angel of God miraculously defeated Assyria; 185,000 soldiers died, 2 Kings 19:35.
 2. Yet, when God defeated the Egyptians, He used no miracle. He used Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, to accomplish His purpose, Jeremiah 46:2; Daniel 3:37-38. There was no miracle in this case. This was a case of God arranging an outcome—providence.
- B. With respect to God supplying sustenance.
 1. Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, John 6:1-14.
 2. Yet, without a miracle, God gives us our daily bread, Matthew 5:45; 6:11. God provides for us through natural law—by means of the earth, seed, sun and rain. No miracle is needed.
- C. With respect to God healing the human body.
 1. Jesus miraculously and instantaneously healed a paralyzed man, Matthew 9:1-7.
 2. Yet, God healed King Hezekiah by use of medicine, 2 Kings 20:1-7.
 - a. Hezekiah was sick and about to die. He prayed to God and God healed Him. The Lord said, “I will heal you...” and He did.
 - b. What means was used to heal Hezekiah? God worked through medicine—a poultice of figs. God healed Hezekiah, but there is no hint of miraculous intervention.
- D. With respect to God delivering His people—even saving them from death.
 1. Jesus miraculously saved His disciples from death in the sea, Matthew 8:25-26.
 2. Yet, God saved Paul from death in Asia without a miracle, Acts 19:23-41.
 - a. Someone looks at this and says, “I didn’t see God doing anything!” (Neither did you see God doing anything in the previous cases of providence.) I understand why one would say that. Because in the case of providence, we do not expect an outward display of power. From our perspective, we may see nothing, but God is at work.
 - b. Here is how we know God was at work in saving Paul: Paul later refers to this incident in Asia in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. Paul says “God ...delivered us...” 2 Corinthians 1:9-10. God did it, but used no miracle to accomplish Paul’s deliverance. There is no miracle in Acts 19:23ff. What means did God use to save Paul? He used the town clerk.
 - c. What did the Corinthians do to help Paul? Someone might say, “They did nothing.” Oh, but they did do something! They prayed for Paul, 2 Corinthians 1:11. God heard and answered their prayers. God was active in this case? He was active, yet saved Paul without a miracle.
- E. In the cases above, do we know exactly how God acted in each circumstance? We do not.
 1. What are the consequences to us if we do not know how God acted? There are none.
 2. What might happen if we worry too much about how God acts? We might not pray.
 3. A farmer says, “I will not plant any of my crops until I understand exactly how germination works.” Would that be wise? What would you say to him? He doesn’t have to know!

Conclusion:

1. In light of what we have seen, we make this affirmation: *God is active in our present world and can work through nature, men, and other natural means to produce a desired outcome.* Therefore, we ought to pray and have confidence in our God that He hears and answers prayer.
2. People who know and believe the Bible pray in accord with James 5:16b. Our duty and privilege is to pray—and then trust in God for Him to provide the answer. The problem many have is a failure to understand that God can work without a miraculous demonstration.
3. Men believe that if God acts at all, that it requires a miracle. They have a limited view of God’s power. There are two extremes to be avoided:
 - a. That of calling every unusual, remarkable thing a miracle (regardless of whether God did it.)
 - b. That of thinking that God does nothing.
4. Men need to remember Luke 1:37. Only when men are convinced that God is truly in charge of our world (and the universe), and that He can work through nature, men, and other natural means, will they pray as they should. Let us pray!