

# 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

## Miracles

Presented by Margaret Hall

### Introduction

Recently I heard an interviewer on television ask his interviewee, “Do you believe in an intervening God? It was a good question. But I was a bit surprised when without any hesitation she said, “Yes”.

It’s not so difficult to vaguely believe in God, as some kind of force, out there somewhere - a distant, detached God. But a God who steps in, who’s actively at work to achieve some over-arching purpose? It can be quite difficult to believe in a God who does things we can’t explain, things that bend the rules that govern how the universe works. Not that we’ve succeeded in understanding all those rules, but still we incline more to a God who sticks to what we do know about them.

We might also ask: if God can and does intervene, why doesn’t he do it more often? If what we call miracles are down to him, why can’t we rely on him to come up with one? Especially when it’s something very important - something we really long for.

### Part 2

All the miracles in the Bible are about a Creator-God changing the rules as we understand them. To pick a few examples: water sprang out of a dry rock when God told Moses to strike it; an altar was set alight at the exact moment Elijah prayed it would be-, Jesus turned the contents of a row of very large water jars into a top-quality wine.

For many in our scientifically-minded age, such miracles are a real stumbling-block. There’s no way, they say, the waters of the Red Sea rolled back, no way Jesus walked on water, or satisfied the hunger of thousands of people with five loaves and two fish. For those who feel such things can’t happen, having them recorded in the Bible means the Bible is not to be trusted.

But whether we can bring ourselves to believe in miracles really depends on what we believe about how the world came into being - through the mind and will of an all-powerful Creator, or from a cosmic soup of particles blindly organizing themselves into very complex systems - “an accident,- to quote Professor Paul Davies, “of mind-numbing improbability”. Theories of how the world came into being are based on the discoveries of geologists and physicists. But we also have to deal with the historical facts of what Jesus did and said, revealing a Creator-God who’s working out his good purpose for the world he loves.

Ultimately it’s a matter of what we choose to believe. And that rather depends on how we react to the possibility that we don’t exist simply to please ourselves. Many don’t like the thought that we’re dependent on and answerable to a Being who not only is self-giving love, but who wants us to be as well.

If we do choose to believe there's Someone higher than ourselves who brought the world into being, it's no great leap to believe he can do whatever he decides to do with the so-called 'natural' laws he himself put in place. In other words God can easily do what to us appears miraculous.

But why would he? What's the purpose of miracles? Certainly not to impress us -God doesn't need to do that, nor does it fit with his character as Jesus revealed it. Jesus knew his miracles were evidence that God had sent him, but he refused to do them on demand, simply to compel belief. Nor were his miracles like magic tricks, done to entertain the sensation-seeking crowds. The miracles we find in the Bible aren't guarantees of our personal health and safety - like, if God healed so-and-so, then he'll surely heal me.

Jesus' miracles are what his close friend John called them – signs. Signs of God intervening - signs of God on the move. God on the move to right the wrongs of a world out-of-kilter with him. God on the move to keep his promise to Abraham. And God on the move to bless the world through Abraham's descendant, Jesus,

It's clear from the record that Jesus had access to the Creator's power, and being filled with compassion, he did set right some of the wrongs he saw. In doing that he was pointing to a time when nature gone feral would be brought under control, when evil would be put down and our last enemy death would be done away. His miracles give us little glimpses into what God's going to do with a chaotic world, of how it will be when it works as it was made to.

Some people see miracles as unnatural reversals of the laws of the physical universe, but what's really unnatural is the creature ignoring the Creator or thinking he can take his place. The destruction, decay and death that result are what's unnatural. For example, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche thought Christianity was destroying human potential. He declared that God was dead and prophesied that, once the shackles of things like morality and humility were thrown off, a new super-race would emerge. One of his admirers was Adolf Hitler.

If the miracles in the Bible are signs, a sign is not the same thing as proof. To quote the writer Philip Yancey, a sign is merely a marker for someone who's looking in the right direction. For example, the Pharaoh of Moses' time saw the signs that God was at work but his heart was hardened by what he saw. In the same way, not all the people who witnessed Jesus' miracles took them as proof that God was with him. Quite a crowd was there in front of Lazarus' grave, when Jesus prayed aloud that people might believe God had sent him, then commanded the corpse to come out. John recorded that many who saw the corpse come out did put their faith in Jesus. But others went off and complained about him to the religious leaders. They didn't deny Lazarus came out of the tomb. They couldn't do that - they'd seen it happen, as had many others. But still their reaction was hostile.

Believing is more than agreeing with the evidence, isn't it? Two people can examine the same evidence. Both are unable to deny it, but one chooses to take it on board, and the other chooses not to. And God's not in the business of steam-rolling people into trusting him, with a huge weight of proof. He wants our faith to be voluntary, because he made us for love, and love cannot be forced.

We make many of our everyday choices on the basis of evidence rather than proof. For example, we might be out driving in the country, and come upon an old bridge. It looks as if it's been there a long time, and we wonder how it'll cope with the weight of our vehicle. We have some evidence that it will; there's no sign warning us not to use it; other cars have come this way, and they're not lined up waiting to cross. We'd prefer proof, but the only way to get that is to decide to use it.

So with believing in God. We weigh the evidence. It centres round the compellingly attractive person of Jesus of Nazareth, who repeatedly declared by what he said and did, "I am God". It's when we decide to trust him that we find out whether he's for real.

### **Part 3.**

There is one miracle that outshines all others with its power to change the way things naturally are. Jesus explained it to a man called Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, and most Pharisees were very suspicious of Jesus, seeing his power and popularity as a threat to their position. Nicodemus came to see Jesus, but made sure he came after dark: It seems he wanted to know who Jesus really was. Clearly the things he'd been doing were beyond human power. It certainly looked like God had sent him. Was it possible this Galilean was the long-awaited Messiah, the King of the Jews?

Nicodemus brought up the miracles Jesus had done: "Teacher", he said, "we know you've come from God, because no one could do such things apart from God." Jesus' answer seems unconnected. He said, "No one can see God's kingdom unless they're born again." What does that have to do with miracles?

Perhaps it's this - that if Nicodemus was impressed by the amazing things Jesus had done, a greater miracle is a person getting to see God's kingdom, that is, admitting God's in charge. It means coming out of the darkness of living for oneself into the light of living under God's loving rule. That's a change in the way we naturally are that's so radical, so all-transforming, the best picture Jesus could use to describe it is birth - a completely new beginning - a fresh start. There's nothing fresher than a new born baby.

Recently I came in on the tail-end of a conversation about religion. Someone was saying "Born again" - "I hate those born-again Christians! It's so over the top, like they think they're someone!" Maybe if you reach the point of knowing you need a fresh start, you're not thinking you're someone, but it's a shame that's the impression she's got.

It's a shame Jesus' word-picture has been hi-jacked. These days you hear of born-again politicians, or born-again entertainers, meaning they are sincere or full-on. But 'born-again' is Jesus' expression. As a picture of a great spiritual truth, it's perfect, but Nicodemus chose to take it literally. He said to Jesus, "How can you be born when you're old? Can you get back into your mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. I tell you, no one can enter God's kingdom unless they're born by water and the Spirit "

We all know water means cleansing. And in order to relate to God we do need cleaning up, not by performing elaborate rituals, nor even by our best efforts to be good people, but by God's power. We feel that at work supremely through Jesus' death and resurrection, as he took on the power the evil one has to destroy our connection to God.

As Jesus said, unless we're born again by water - unless we ask for the cleansing he died to provide - we cannot see the kingdom of God.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus made it clear in his answer to Nicodemus that the spiritual rebirth we all need is a miracle only the Holy Spirit can bring about.

You hear it said so often, “You can’t change human nature.” It’s true. We can’t. But with God nothing is impossible. By the power of the Holy Spirit he implants a new nature, and keeps renewing it till we’re re-made in his image. It’s like the wind, Jesus said. You can’t see it - you just see what it does- And we see what the Holy Spirit does - the miracle of how he changes the way we think and act.

Like a friend of ours; when we first knew him, forty years ago, he had a reputation for speaking his mind and could be sharp to the point of being hurtful. Now I see him as one of the wisest, most gracious people I know. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus to all who turn to him.

*Almighty God and Father, thank you for the greatest miracle of all - the new birth that admits us into your family to live under your rule of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*