

“The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’ And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

One of the things I enjoy is watching the show, *Penn and Teller: Fool Us*. On the show, magicians try to fool Penn and Teller, two of the leading magicians in our day and age. After the trick has been performed, Penn and Teller describe—at least in a way that seems to make sense to the magician—how the trick was done. They also make it very clear that what the audience sees and what they see are very different. We see something that appears out of nowhere. Penn and Teller know how it was made to appear. We see something float by itself. They describe in a coded way how it was done. We see someone pick a card, sign it and then it appears in a sealed envelope. They know how it got there. Yes, there are times they don’t know how the trick was performed, but they do know that there is never any real magic involved. These are not supernatural occurrences—they are what properly is called legerdemain—things accomplished by sleight of hand, with mirrors, or with special equipment, skilfully manipulated by some very talented performers.

While magicians perform tricks, God is a God of wonders beyond all understanding. He does work great miracles. Those miracles surround us as much today as they ever did. Yet we often overlook the miraculous, and discount the great power of God at work for our good. Maybe we take things for granted, or look for human explanations when the only true answer is to know that God has done something that only God can do. That, my dear friends, is what a miracle truly is—God working in ways beyond our understanding.

The Bible, we know, is filled with many accounts of the miraculous. Our VBS will be looking at events in Egypt, and remember the miracles that God worked in the plagues, and in the Passover, and through the parting of the Red Sea. In our office devotions this week, we read how, by the power of God, Joshua commands the sun and moon to stand still, freezing time in the process; By the command and power of God, Elijah closes up the heavens so that no rain fell for three years in the land of Israel. Both Elijah and Elisha bring dead children back to life. Our Bible study in Acts showed how Peter and John and all the apostles performed miracles of healing by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel lesson today talks of the miracles that were performed by the 72 disciples Jesus sends out with the command: **“Heal the sick. . . and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”** (Luke 10:9, ESV) In the words of our text, we are assured that the ministry of those disciples was blessed in His grace. “Wow, Jesus! Even the demons listen to us in Your name!” These faithful servants saw the wonder of miracles at work in their own ministries.

Make no mistake about it: none of these things happen because of the people themselves. They are not magic tricks or hoaxes. They are great miracles which God works, even through His human messengers. But that may also make us wonder, “Why does it seem that God no longer works in these truly wondrous ways today”?

The first thing we should say about miracles is that God definitely performs miracles in our world today. The problem is that we don’t think of His work as miraculous. Luther said that our world is full of God’s miraculous working. He wrote: *we are so accustomed to find that grain grows out of the earth annually, and we are so blinded by this that we pay no attention to it; for what we daily see and hear we do not consider a miracle. And yet it is as great a miracle as Christ’s feeding the multitude with seven loaves.* When the request for this sermon came in, it came with the question, “are there things that we don’t tend to think of as miraculous which truly are?” That answer, as Luther gives it, would be a definite, “Yes!”. There are countless “miracles” that take place in the ordinary things of life, and there are some miracles that go beyond the ordinary. There are still great miracles of healing that defy medical science. I am not thinking of the so called miracles worked by faith healers, because to be honest, I am not convinced of many of the claims made by these people. Some of them have been exposed as frauds, and many of them use miraculous signs to lead people to trust in their power rather than in the God who must be the power behind all miracles. Yet we also hear accounts of people who are dying because their bodies are riddled with incurable cancer—and suddenly they are in remission, and the tumours or whatever are disappearing. There is only one possible

explanation: it's a miracle. Or a car rolls over, totally destroying the vehicle, and yet the passengers walk away unharmed. Is that not a miracle? We hear of victims of earthquakes and tornadoes or other disasters, where people have been buried under rubble for days, and yet they were found alive. How sad it is that we often hear people attribute this to luck: "boy, weren't they lucky to be able to walk away from that accident. It's a good thing they bought a car with the best safety features". No, the truth is that they were blessed, for God worked a miracle, in accordance with His wise and perfect will.

The second thing that we can say about God's miracles is that we really don't need them to help us know and believe in Him. When we were children, we read books that were full of pictures, but as we grew in our reading skill and ability, we could do without the pictures. In the infant days of the church people needed miracles, the pictures, to help them understand God's power and grace. But as the people and the church grew in maturity of faith, the pictures became less important. We don't need miracles to lead us to faith: we need God's Word. On several occasions people ask Jesus for some miraculous sign that will prove that He is the Messiah. ***But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.*** (Matthew 12:39 - ESV) While Jesus did perform signs and wonders in order to let His true glory be seen and to help people in their faith, He still wanted people to look more at the Word of God than at the miracles. He also warns us that the devil will use false signs and wonders to catch people's attention and lead them from the truth. That is what I see in many of the so-called miracle workers of our day. If we believe only because of the miracles that we see, then we will easily be misled by false signs and wonders. Scripture tells us: ***So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*** (Romans 10:17 - ESV) Miracles can help us see the glory of God, but they are not the basis of our faith. God's Word is the basis of our faith.

In His Word, God reveals to us the only miracles that really matter—first, the miracle of God the Son taking on our human flesh and blood so that He can live a holy life for us and offer that sinless life as a sacrifice for us on the cross; and then the miracle of the Resurrection, where the crucified Saviour rises from the dead to bear sure and certain testimony to the fact that God's plan for our salvation has been completed, and that we have both forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. Without these two miracles there would be no hope for sinners like us. We would be dead in our trespasses and sin. But these miracles did happen, and through them God saves us and assures us of life with Him in heaven.

Then, of course, we have the great miracle that God's Word continues to bring people to faith in the dying and rising Saviour. Jesus sends out the 72, and their witness bears fruit. This is why Jesus tells His disciples: ***"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."*** How blessed we are in the miracle of God's grace, that we who deserve nothing but judgement have our names written in heaven. God has marked our reservation. He has a place for us. He frees us from the sin and death of this world, giving us the fulness of life in Him.

Our loving God continues to work many great and wondrous miracles among us such as miracles of healing and miracles of divine providence. That doesn't mean He will always heal us when we are sick or multiply our food supply to feed us for a year. Not everyone who was sick was healed during Jesus' earthly life. I don't know why God chooses to reveal His miraculous power in one case, and not in another. But I do know that He works the greatest—and the only important miracle—in the lives of all believers; the miracle of our salvation. It is a miracle that God still cares about sinners like you and me that He saves us from eternal torment in hell and grants us His forgiveness, especially when we consider how often we hurt Him in the sins we commit against Him. It is a miracle that God can bring faith and life into our dead and hardened hearts: faith which is the sole difference between eternal life and eternal death. It is a miracle that He still cares about us and does help us to get through each and every day. Yes, there are still miracles today, and they still help us to see the glory of God. May they also encourage us in our faith, as the miracles of Jesus encouraged the disciples, assuring us of a God who can, and who does work for the highest good of His people. Amen.