

Church of God, The Eternal

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Dear Brethren,

As the Church of the last days has progressively aged in this century, comparisons have been made about the level of God's miraculous interventions in the lives of His people today compared to the early days. Some feel God is not making the same dramatic demonstrations of His power as was common in the thirties, forties, or even fifties. If this perception is true, what might account for the difference in God's dealings with His chosen people? We know His will is perfect and that an unalterable plan is being carried out in this age, so whatever the answer, it must be part of the perfect plan of God. Many hasty assumptions may be made by human beings that are erroneous and misleading. For each of us to understand and fulfill our own personal responsibility before God, it is important we have a strong foundation of faith, and not begin to think God has forsaken us or left us alone. Even the smallest seed of doubt allowed to grow today could become the vine that chokes out our opportunity for salvation tomorrow. "Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him" (Heb. 10:38). In that case, what might determine the role of signs and miracles in God's purpose for us?

To shed light on some possible explanations, it is most helpful to evaluate the examples of God's dealings with His people from recorded Biblical accounts. Specifically, the experiences of ancient Israel can help us observe the thinking of God, and the blueprint of His interventions for a chosen people. How did God's work with the Israelites begin and progress over time? We know God first sent a chosen servant to initiate their call out of bondage. How did the people initially respond when first coming to understand God's purpose? "And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: And Aaron spake all the words which the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed: and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped" (Ex. 4:29-31). God provided miraculous signs to accompany Moses' message to help substantiate the authority of those servants, and the people responded with reverence and appreciation.

But what happened after Moses' first encounter with Pharaoh, when Pharaoh responded with cruelty toward the children of Israel? "And they met Moses and Aaron, who stood in the way, as they came forth from Pharaoh: And they said unto them, The LORD look upon you, and judge; because ye have made our savour to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us" (Ex. 5:20–21). Their trust and reverence certainly waned rapidly. Even so, God responded in kindness, overlooking their natural response, as if to imply He knew it would require many more proofs before a carnal people might ever be expected to really believe and trust Him. Thence followed ten miraculous plagues in Egypt that witnessed the power of God, not only to the Egyptians, but equally to the Israelites. Culminating in the unprecedented Exodus of a nation of millions out of slavery, one would think Israel would surely have learned to trust their God. But what occurred in the very next test at the Red Sea?

And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness (Ex. 14:11–12).

Still God responded with mercy and kindness, delivering them again from certain death through yet another unparalleled miracle. Even so, it was only three days later that they failed the next test at Marah (Ex. 15:24). Time and again God withstood their unbelief and patiently gave them more and more evidence of His faithfulness. But suddenly the approach changed at Mt. Sinai.

And Moses went up unto God, and the LORD called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel (Ex. 19:3–6).

Now God was telling them His blessings and interventions would be conditional upon their faithfulness. By now they had certainly seen enough of His power to be expected to believe God's intent to protect and save them. God had proved He was faithful. Now they would be held accountable. But again we find that in spite of their promises to do so, the Israelites still could not trust. We also know that every act of disobedience from that point

forward brought with it severe penalties. No longer would they be permitted to doubt God and still enjoy the fullness of His mercy (Ex. 32:27–28). In Numbers we find the final summary of the failure of that generation.

But as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD. Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; Surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it (Num. 14:21–23).

And so that entire generation died in the wilderness because they could not develop faith (Heb. 4:2). But we know there was no other possible result, because ancient Israel was carnal and without the benefit of God's indwelling Holy Spirit.

How Is This Lesson Relevant to Us?

The Apostle Paul expounded the real purpose for everything the Israelites experienced. "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:11). This means our own experiences parallel those of Israel, and in fact we know our spiritual call out of this world and into God's Church directly correlates to that exodus from Egypt.

We find this same parallel involved when the New Testament Church was raised.

And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:43–47).

The same enthusiasm was present there as when Israel began their trek out of bondage. This early Church likewise became a witness to the undeniable power of God, and their belief was bolstered by what they experienced. It was as if God provided those auspicious signs and wonders at the initiation of His great works in each age to verify that they were indeed of divine origin. But we also know at least by the end of that first century,

in spite of those signs, the majority of those churches had corrupted themselves and turned away from that truth, in the very example of ancient Israel.

What about us? Those who have been in the Church for many years often relate their knowledge of the significant signs and miracles that became almost commonplace earlier this century. But regardless of when we were called, is it not also true we each heard a chosen servant and were called in a miraculous way? While not all of us may have witnessed truly auspicious signs, can there be any doubt we were all beneficiaries of the incredible, personal intervention of God? Is it not true we have each experienced the proof of God's love and mercy in our own lives?

Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy [Spirit], and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy [Spirit] (1 Thess. 1:4-6).

Just as Israel witnessed the love and compassion of God as He saved them repeatedly, can any of us deny we have also had similar witnesses? But if ancient Israel and the first century Church recorded lessons for us through failure, should we not be very concerned about repeating their very mistakes? What can we really learn from the above examples that will help us understand the operation of God and respond differently than our predecessors?

The Apostle Paul also admonished, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). Notice that the first part of this command relates to accepting our divine call and believing that revealed Way. We must come to trust God and the promises He has made. This involves much more than a scholarly review of scripture. It actually covers everything we experience that convinces us of the power of that one true God. Then notice the second part of that instruction. We are admonished to "*hold fast that which is good.*" This affirms we must then act on that Way we have come to accept and believe. It literally means we are then expected to act in faith and fulfill His will—to show fruits through obedience.

We Prove God, Then He Proves Us

What now becomes apparent is God provides time for us to mature, offering each one of us the chance to prove that He is faithful and worthy of our trust. But like He did with Israel at Mt. Sinai, at some point, we will each be held accountable for having learned the lesson, and henceforth expected to walk forward, exercising faith. There comes a time for

each of us when God considers we have been schooled enough in basic principles, and we then become accountable for effectively using that training in the real world. God first allows us to prove that He is faithful and worthy of trust, but then He likewise puts us to the test to verify whether we will remember those lessons. Is it therefore possible more of us are now in that time of testing, having already witnessed enough of His miracles and interventions to certify God's hand in our lives and to be expected to walk in faith? If we yet require additional monumental signs, might we be like ancient Israel who never seemed to see enough proof?

Would this expectation mean God is then hard and overly demanding, seeing how difficult it is to exercise such faith? Hardly! For if we recognize our only hope for salvation is in developing and exhibiting real faith, any trials He presents or allows us to experience today is for the express purpose of developing that necessary ingredient. He wants us to succeed. God wants each one of us to become a permanent member of His eternal family. How else then would a loving Father deal with us except to facilitate that crucible of personal development? His true motive is substantiated in Malachi.

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it (Mal. 3:10).

Here we find an admonition to verify God's love and mercy by stepping out in faith to obey the tithing law. Notice He does not promise to bless us first with great abundance so that it becomes easier to tithe. He requires us *first* to commit in faith and obey that command, promising then to shower us with great abundance for our obedience. In spite of all the proofs we have witnessed of His faithfulness, do we hearken to those past examples and act now in faith in the conduct of our lives, or do we have difficulty in remembering those things when faced with a present crisis, just like our predecessors did? God has still inexorably bound himself to answer our prayers if we ask according to His will. "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt. 21:22). "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him" (1 John 5:14-15).

Therefore, if significant miracles are less frequent than they once were, is it possible we are facing the time when God expects us to demonstrate greater faith in order to receive? As the time of the return of Christ draws nearer and nearer, should not the maturity of the Church of the last days begin to be manifested by an increase in our collective faith?

The disciples faced this same challenge. Even though Jesus Christ taught them directly and personally in the flesh, they too had difficulty in mustering necessary faith in certain trying situations. After they failed to cast out a demon plaguing a young boy, they wondered why they had been unsuccessful. "Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you" (Matt. 17:19–20). What are the characteristics of that mustard seed? "Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof" (Matt. 13:31–32).

From this we learn that faith, represented by that tiny mustard seed, is something that begins very small, but has the greatest of potential. But planting that seed of faith within our lives requires an initial, significant step. To exercise that first, very least of steps still requires a fundamental belief in God's promises. It was the very step Israel was never able to take. Why did Jesus Christ say faith as of a mustard seed could move mountains? Because once someone can exhibit enough faith to take the first important step, that individual has already begun the course that leads to a true relationship with God. From there, staying on that course without wavering provides unlimited opportunities and blessings.

Job provides one of the best examples of that kind of confidence. He was certainly tested beyond anything any of us have ever experienced. He was initially blessed greatly by God and considered the greatest of the men of the east (Job 1:3). Even with that power and wealth, Job recognized God was his Benefactor. When all of those blessings were swept away from him, he still hearkened to the lessons he had already learned, refusing to doubt the power and authority of the eternal God. God allowed Job to prove Him, and then when put to the test himself, Job proved he had not forgotten those lessons. At the height of his distress, he still stated with determination, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him" (Job 13:15). Notice also the incredible vision he maintained in looking forward to the resurrection. "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet [without] my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:25–26). Job did not ask for additional proof of God, or begin to doubt whether His law was still binding. Even though he did struggle with understanding the purpose of his trial, he never doubted it was of God for a divine purpose.

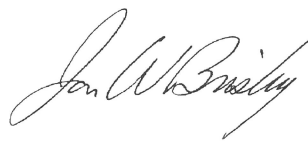
How would we compare ourselves at this point to the example of Job? Are we yet willing to place ourselves totally in the hands of God, already convinced by the proofs we have seen, or are we still struggling to remember those past miracles we have witnessed? If we sometimes wish we could just see one monumental sign from God to bolster our faith, perhaps it is a signal we need to spend additional time recounting the significant experiences God has already provided.

Our original question addressed the comparison of God's dramatic intervention today compared to the early years of the last day Church. Would a decrease in the number of monumental signs then be an indication that God has separated Himself from us? Since we have seen that God's perfect plan is still on course and being carried out as we near the return of Christ, we know there is a purpose for everything we are experiencing. We also know that what we are experiencing is the very thing God's people of the past experienced. Signs and wonders were used for specific purpose. If we can recognize the logical thread God used toward the perfecting of those previous generations, it should help us see that the same eternal God is working with us in a consistent fashion. Rather than being a challenge to our faith, this realization should actually help bolster our confidence. If we also understand the purpose for all of God's interventions is the development of requisite faith, we can begin to see that both times of frequent and infrequent miracles work harmoniously together toward that common purpose.

We know the time is coming when the most incredible miracles ever to be witnessed will occur, just prior to the consummation of this age. Do we recognize the necessity now to use our limited time to nurture the seed of faith to maturity? If we will act with urgency and purpose, we can learn from the mistakes of our predecessors and be prepared to pass the final tests of faith that are certainly ahead. At stake is our hope of eternal glory.

With continual prayers for the chosen people of God,

Your servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the typed name.

Jon W. Brisby