

A FAILED MIRACLE?

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Recorded in Matthew 17:14-21 (and also in Mark 9:14-29 and Luke 9:37-42) is the only case in the Bible where a true prophet of God attempted to perform a miracle and the effort failed. The text says that a man came to Jesus and said, "Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is a lunatic, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water. *And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.*" Jesus then "rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: *and the child was cured from that very hour.*" Why was Jesus able to perform this miracle, but not his apostles? This unique situation is certainly worthy of careful study and consideration.

God's witness

These days, the word "miracle" is often used very loosely, to describe almost anything that is wonderful or amazing. For example, we frequently hear about the "miracle of childbirth" or someone's "miraculous recovery" from an illness or an escape from danger. Without question, God does many great things to bless us, provide for us, and protect us. He deserves the credit and praise for every good and perfect gift (Jas 1:17). However, the wonderful blessings that God gives to people today are not actually *miracles* in the true sense of the word. Biblically, a miracle by definition is a divine act that breaks natural or scientific laws. In other words, it is something that is literally *impossible* except by the power of God. Miracles were performed by God to confirm His word (Mark 16:20; Heb 2:3-4). That is, the miracles were God's own testimony to whomever He inspired to speak His word so that all men would know that those words were indeed His, and not man's. That is how the people knew that Moses spoke God's word (Exod 4), and also Elijah (1 Kgs 17), and the other Old Testament prophets. That is also how the people knew that Jesus Christ was speaking God's word (John 2:11,23). Nicodemus rightly said to the Lord, "*Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him*" (John 3:1-2). Jesus said of his miraculous works, "*The same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me. And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me*" (John 3:36-37). It should be noted that there would be a definite endpoint to God's revelation to man, as Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would guide his apostles "into *all truth*" (John 16:12-13). When the revelation was finished (when "that which is perfect" had come, in contrast to what had before been only "in part"), the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit would be "done away" (1 Cor 13:8-10). There would be no continuing need to confirm the already-confirmed and completed scriptures. A request made in Hades by the formerly rich man for a *re*-confirmation of God's word for the sake of his unbelieving brothers on earth was denied (Luke 16:27-31). If they did not believe the miracles that had already been performed and recorded in scripture, they would not believe what they saw with their own eyes. Sadly, such was the case with many who saw with their own eyes the miracles that Jesus did (Matt 11:20-24; John 12:37). Do we need more miracles today to confirm the words of the Bible

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that have already been confirmed? No! John 20:30-31 says, “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: *but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*” All the miracles we need have already been performed, and are written in our Bibles.

Those who lack God’s witness

The Bible records numerous occasions where the inability of false teachers to perform a miracle revealed that they were speaking of themselves, and were not inspired of God. In 1 Kings 18, God sent fire down from heaven to bear witness to his prophet Elijah, while Baal’s false prophets were not answered by fire. When there was a dispute between Christ and the Pharisees concerning whether or not it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, God bore witness to His Son and not to the false teachers (Matt 12:10-14). Jesus also performed a miracle to prove that he had power on earth to forgive sins after his claim to that power had been wrongly called blasphemy (Matt 9:1-8). Elymas the sorcerer contradicted Paul and Barnabas when they were teaching God’s word to the Roman deputy Sergius Paulus at Paphos on the island of Cyprus. Elymas was then struck blind by Paul and the deputy “believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord” (Acts 13:6-12). God’s witness to Paul and not to Elymas revealed to the deputy who was speaking God’s word. Does this mean that the apostles’ failure to cast out the devil in Matthew 17 is an indication that they were not speaking God’s word? Of course not. Matthew 10:1 tells us that Christ gave to his apostles “*power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.*” Therefore, when they failed to cast the devil out of the child in Matthew 17, it was not because they lacked the power. What happened then? The apostles themselves asked Jesus that question in Matthew 17:19. “*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 17:20). (There are many men today who falsely claim to have the power to perform miracles, and they typically blame their failures on the ones they are attempting to heal, accusing *them* of not having enough faith to be healed rather than blaming themselves!) How did the apostles lack faith on this occasion? Christ told them, “*Howbeit this kind goes not out but by prayer and fasting*” (Matt 17:21). The apostles had not had enough faith to ask God to cast this devil out, which only He could do. Jesus always acknowledged God’s authority and made request of Him and thanked Him (Matt 11:25; Luke 10:21; John 11:41-44). Jesus obviously prayed or else he would not have been able to cast out the devil either (though his prayer must have been both short and silent or else the apostles would have noticed a difference between what he did and what they did). The apostles failed because they did not have enough faith to pray. Finally, this unusual situation does not represent an actual failure of the witness of God, because Jesus cast out the devil.