

The Purpose of Miracles

Exodus 6:28–7:13; Acts 19:11–20

The unregenerate man prefers entertainment over worship. Only the person whose heart has been supernaturally changed by the Spirit of God truly desires to worship. If you are born again, then you have a deep desire to enter the presence of God, commune with him, hear his voice speaking in the word, pray and sing his praises. I remember a young friend once telling me that his parents had sent him to a Christian school. One of the required classes was Bible, which he found to be intolerably boring. But then the Lord opened his heart and he was born again, and after that he totally looked forward to Bible class. It was like candy to him. It became his favorite class. He couldn't get enough of it. He had a heart for God and a deep desire to worship him.

Over the years we have had people visit our church for a time, then leave, saying our worship wasn't exciting enough. Some of them found their way to churches that had high-powered, pounding music, "healings" and "miracles," which seemed so much more exciting. Things were happening. Excitement was in the air. People were on the edge of their seat, waiting to see what would happen next. Folks who attend churches like that find Reformed worship boring: Psalms and hymns, the word, sacraments, prayer. Where is the excitement?

Why do we worship as we do? In worship, our emphasis is on *God*. As we worship, we come into the presence of God. Nothing that we do should overshadow God. His word instructs us, "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1). If we are "risen with Christ"—that is, born again, raised to newness of life—then we are drawn to heavenly things, spiritual truths that steel us to fight the good fight and lay hold on eternal life, our eyes firmly fixed on the goal, which is worship in the presence of Christ forevermore. I have three points this morning, first,

1. Expounding the Scriptures (vv. 10, 20)

This may seem like a strange way to treat a text that begins with the words "Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul." Shouldn't our first point be something like "unusual miracles"? But the miracles spoken of must be considered in context. Consider this: Luke brackets verses 10–20 with references to "the word of the Lord." Speaking of Paul's daily teaching of the word in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, "this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus" (v. 10). Then, at the end of today's text, we read these words: "So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed." Here are explicit references to "the word of the Lord Jesus" and "the word of the Lord."

If you've attended this church for any time at all you certainly know that the Bible is God's word. The Bible is different from every other book, in that its ultimate author is God. Not only is God its *author*, but its *purpose* clearly is to

reveal God. The main character of Holy Scripture is the Lord Jesus Christ, who came in the flesh to purchase our salvation with his own precious blood. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!” But not only is Christ the main character of Scripture, but the Bible itself is called “the word of Christ.” Paul writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom” (Col. 1:16). The Bible is the word of *Christ*. It was inspired by his Holy Spirit, whom he poured out upon his church, and it was written to reveal Christ. No matter where you open up your Bible and read, you are reading the word of Christ.

Paul’s ministry in Ephesus was a Word-centered ministry. He proclaimed the Word publicly. We read that Paul “went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God” (v. 8). But when opposition from the unbelieving Jews began to be more than just a distraction, Paul withdrew to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, where he spent two years teaching the Word daily.

Wouldn’t it have been grand to sit under the ministry of the apostle Paul daily for two years? Here was a man who was steeped in the Scriptures. He knew his Bible, and he knew how to interpret it. He knew that its primary message was Christ and the accomplishment of redemption. Sitting under the ministry of the apostle Paul must have been better than a Bible college or seminary education. How fortunate we are to have the essence of Paul’s teaching in his many letters, which form almost half the New Testament.

But not only do we have the statements in verses 10 and 20, we also have Paul’s testimony itself in the next chapter, Acts 20. Paul was in a hurry to get back to Jerusalem, so he sailed past Ephesus and stopped at Miletus. He sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus. They came to him, and in a tearful farewell he recalled his ministry while among them. He says, “I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” He recalled his ministry as being one of proclamation and teaching—proclaiming and teaching the word of God. He boldly testifies: “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Clearly, Paul’s ministry in Ephesus was expounding and applying the holy Scriptures.

And so it is today. Ministers of Christ are ministers of word and sacrament. Their primary task is to preach and teach the Word and administer the divinely-appointed sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper. In his last epistle the apostle Paul charges the ministers of Christ: “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” Here is the minister’s primary task. He is not to be a CEO directing the operations of a

company; he is to be a preacher and teacher of the Word. As he told the Ephesian elders, “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). The Word alone has the power to build up the saints and give them a heavenly inheritance. For that reason the minister must “study to show [himself] approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

How committed are you, dear saint of God, to learn the Holy Scriptures? Do you attend the preaching of the word “with diligence, preparation and prayer”¹? Are you eager to learn its truths and apply them to your own life? Are you committed to cast down your imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring all your thinking into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ²? Are you willing to make the necessary changes in your own practice to bring your life into conformity with the will of God revealed in Holy Scripture? Can you honestly pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”³? Are you committed to attend a church where the Word of God is preached and honored as the only infallible rule of faith and practice? Are you deeply desirous that the peace of Christ should rule—be judge, decide, control, arbitrate—in your heart⁴? The born-again Christian is committed to bring every area of his life into conformity with the will of God revealed in Holy Scripture. We have seen, then, point 1, expounding the Scripture; now consider point 2,

2. Experiencing God’s power (vv. 11–16)

We read that “God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.” Here were “unusual miracles” that happened during the course of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. But notice how our text begins: “*God* worked.” *God* is the subject of the sentence! Paul would have been the first to tell you that these miracles that occurred were not wrought by his own power. Paul himself was not a miracle worker. Even in the text where he defends his apostleship and tells the church that the signs of an apostle—miracles!—had been wrought through his ministry, he says, “when I am weak, then am I strong,” he desires that “the power of Christ” might rest upon him.⁵ Clearly, the miracles

¹ Shorter Catechism 90, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

² 2 Cor. 10:5

³ Ps. 139:23

⁴ Cf. Col. 3:15

⁵ 2 Cor. 12:9–12

that were wrought under Paul's ministry were wrought by the power of Christ, not his own power.

But as one author observes, "Unfortunately, passages like these have been misapplied. Religious hucksters on television have told gullible people bizarre things like, 'Get this prayer hankie that I have prayed over, and it will heal you. ... Order yours now for only \$99.99.'"⁶ We can confidently say that this is *not* the point of this passage!

We read that "God worked *unusual* miracles by the hands of Paul." What was unusual about these miracles? For one thing, some of them were not performed in Paul's presence: "handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them." Paul was a working man. He worked as a tentmaker, so he would be able to preach the Word without charge. Tentmakers in ancient times were also leather-workers. They worked hard, and their bodies produced sweat. Handkerchiefs would have been used to wipe away the sweat, and aprons would have been used to protect clothing and the front of the body as a man did heavy manual labor. These garments were brought from Paul's body to the sick, probably by his assistants in ministry. Whether this was done with or without his explicit knowledge we are not told. But God honored the church's prayers for healing.

In Matthew 8 we read of the ministry of Christ, that "when evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: 'He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses.'" The evangelist makes the point that Christ's ministry of healing and casting out demons was a specific fulfillment of the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53. His doing miracles proved that he was the Messiah.

The word for "diseases" in our Acts text is rendered "sicknesses" in the Matthew text. Disease and sickness are a tragic part of life in a fallen world. When Adam sinned, he brought sin and misery upon all his posterity. Even Christians are not exempt; Christians, too, have to deal with sickness and disease. But we look forward to the day when Christ will say, "Behold, I make all things new," and there will be no more death, or sorrow, or crying, or any more pain.⁷ No more disease! No more sickness! Perfect health throughout eternity future! In the meantime Christians pray for healing. We also go to doctors. Sometimes a medication will be prescribed; other times there will be various kinds of therapeutic techniques. But ultimately, healing is from the Lord. As Psalm 103 declares, it is the LORD "who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction."

⁶ *Christ-centered Exposition Commentary*, Acts (Olive Tree Bible Software)

⁷ Rev. 21:4-5

Going on in our text we read that evil spirits went out of those who were afflicted. What is demon-possession? The term describes a variety of conditions, both physical and emotional-mental-psychological, for which the cause is identified as direct demonic influence.⁸ Jesus said that the devil was “a murderer from the beginning.” His intent is to take the human race with him to the Lake of Fire. The only true remedy is the Gospel. Those who put their trust in Christ receive life everlasting. Our Lord Jesus is able to deliver those who are taken captive by Satan.

Remember when Moses went before Pharaoh and threw down his staff, and it became a serpent? When Moses performed this miracle, Satan was there to offer a counterfeit. Pharaoh called in his sorcerers, and they replicated the miracle with their enchantments. So it was in Ephesus. When the church performed exorcisms, there were some within the Jewish community who tried to cast out demons with the command, “We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.” But in their case it backfired: they were overpowered by the evil spirit. He said, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” The man who was possessed by the evil spirit “leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.” Satan tried to counterfeit the work of God, but he was unsuccessful, and God clearly showed that he was more powerful.

Here were healings and exorcisms that accompanied the ministry of the word. Luke is describing historical events; these miracles actually happened. Our God is omnipotent, he is able to do all his holy will. He who created the laws of nature is able to set them aside at will. But let us not lose sight of the purpose of miracles. They are not done for their crowd appeal, as a magician or dancer or special effects artist might try to dazzle a crowd. They are not done to satisfy unregenerate man’s appetite for the sensational. No! The miracles in Scripture were done *to accredit the Lord’s messenger*. Remember our Old Testament text. God had commanded Moses to go before Pharaoh and demand, “Let my people go.” But Moses was unconvinced. He said to God, “But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you.’” After all, it is easy for a person to *claim* that God has appeared to him. But talk is cheap. How were God’s people to know that God had indeed appeared to Moses and sent him to Pharaoh? God told Moses to cast his rod on the ground, and when he did, it changed into a menacing serpent. Then he told him to pick it up, and the dangerous serpent changed back into a rod. God gave him a second miracle. He told him to put his hand into his bosom, and when it drew it out, his hand was leprous. Then he told him to put his hand in his bosom again, and when he drew it out, it was restored like his other flesh. He gave him a third miracle: to draw water from the

⁸ Thomas Sappington, “Demon Possession” (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/demon-possession/> accessed 10-22-2022)

Nile and pour it upon the ground, and when he did so, the water would change to blood. These miracles would demonstrate that the Lord had indeed appeared to Moses. Miracles accredit the messenger. But with the completion of the canon of Scripture, miracles are no longer necessary. Now, the preacher's authority is the Holy Bible. The test for divine authority is this: is the preacher's message the clear teaching of Scripture, or properly deduced from Scripture⁹?

As I said at the beginning, the unregenerate man prefers entertainment over worship. He wants to see the new, the novel, the dazzling. Yet God is glorified as his people attend to the ordinary means of grace: the word, the sacraments, and prayer. We must not assume God isn't working when we don't see visible miracles. The greatest miracle, after all, is the new birth, when the Holy Spirit converts a person and makes him into a new creature in Christ. Have you been born again? Do you long to know him, to worship him? Do you love him with all your heart? Can you say, "For me to live is Christ; *he* is my portion forever"? So far we have considered "Expounding the Scriptures" and "Experiencing God's power"; let us now consider point three,

3. Eliminating objects of idolatry (vv. 17–19)

We are told that after the seven sons of Sceva tried to exorcise a demon, were overpowered, and fled the scene traumatized and naked, "This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver."

As Calvin observed, the human heart, since the fall, is a factory of idols. As humans, we were made for fellowship with God. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We are to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We are to exclaim with the Psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."¹⁰ *God* is to be our portion. If we love anything or anyone more than God, that is idolatry.

Ephesus was a great city, but it was given over to idolatry. It housed the renowned temple of Artemis (or Diana), the pagan goddess of fertility. There was a whole company of silversmiths there who made their living making and selling idols of Diana. And as the seven sons of Sceva reveal, there was a great trade in the occult.

As a result of the gospel, the sorcerers confessed their evil practices and burned their occult books publicly. They didn't just give the books away or sell them; they

⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01

¹⁰ Ps. 73:25–26

destroyed them. These were costly books—handmade, hand-lettered, hand-copied. Yet the believers wanted a radical break with their sinful past because the Spirit of God had produced a deep change in their hearts. Selling the volumes would have only spread their poison. So the books had to be destroyed. These believers had a new affection. They had a new love for Jesus. Their actions shouted that he was more valuable to them than any god, power, or any amount of money.¹¹ These books were objects of idolatry and had to go. As the hymnwriter expressed it, “Ye who confess Christ’s holy name, to God give praise and glory! Ye who the Father’s power proclaim, to God give praise and glory! *All idols under foot be trod, the Lord is God! the Lord is God!* To God all praise and glory!”¹²

Has Christ changed your life? Are there any idols that vie for your affection—sports, entertainment, devices, pornography? Are there any things that keep you from the Word? Will you destroy them and dedicate yourself to God alone? Will you say, “Jesus Christ is Lord”? Amen.

¹¹ Some elements from *Christ-centered Exposition Commentary*, Acts (Olive Tree Bible Software)

¹² Johann J. Schütz, “All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above” (1675) (*Trinity Hymnal*, 1961)