

MIRACLES, FAITH,
AND UNANSWERED PRAYER

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Chapter 1

A GENUINE HEALING

When I was about 9 years old, I attended a family gathering at my grandma's house. My cousins, my sisters, and I were all playing a game of tag outside in the front yard. All of us were racing around and laughing like typically energetic kids. My sister Cathy, who was about 6 years old at the time, was running, and one cousin who was "it" chased after her. Hurling along with her mouth open, laughing and looking back over her shoulder, she headed straight toward one of the yucca plants in the yard. Just as she turned to see where she was going she plowed face-first into the long, stiff, pointed leaves of the yucca plant. One of them stabbed completely through her tongue and pierced the back of her throat. Cathy stood screaming, impaled on the spine, until my cousin, Eddie, and I ran to her and pulled her backward to free her.

Immediately her mouth began gushing blood. We leaned her forward a bit and helped her inside. Cathy sobbed wildly with her tongue extended from her mouth, and it appeared to me as if the front half of her tongue had been almost completely severed from the back half. The amount of blood pouring from Cathy's mouth was appalling as she staggered into the front room, and it dripped all over the carpet. The entire family was gathered playing pinochle, drinking, and smoking. My mom, who was the solitary Christian in the family, rose from the table in a panic and darted to Cathy. Instantly the entire family gathered around.

A quick examination revealed that only the edges of her tongue still held the front and back halves of her tongue together. The yucca

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leaf had sliced it almost in two. Even leaning forward as she was, Cathy was swallowing some blood because the wound in the back of her throat had stimulated her swallow reflex.

Although her eyes were wide with fear, Mom somehow maintained a calm and soothing exterior as she helped Cathy into the bathroom. There she ran a washcloth under cold water and then pressed it against my sister's tongue to try to stop the bleeding. Mom realized that we would have to take the girl to the hospital, where the emergency room physicians would undoubtedly have to perform an extremely traumatic procedure. But the most important thing for the moment was to calm the girl down and get the bleeding slowed or stopped. The rest of the family gathered in the hallway around the bathroom, offered words of advice, and talked among themselves in horrified tones. Still pressing the washcloth firmly on Cathy's tongue, and in front of the whole family, Mom began to pray for her.

Mom's prayer was quite simple. She just asked God to be with Cathy, to help her, and to give her what she would need to get through the trying time that was ahead. After the prayer Mom gently pulled the washcloth away from Cathy's tongue to see if the bleeding had slowed at all.

The wound was completely gone. We saw no evidence that any damage had ever occurred. Brightening, Cathy said, "It doesn't hurt anymore."

The entire family was flabbergasted. Some of my aunts dropped to their knees, and everybody was speechless. Most of them had caught at least glimpses of the horrific damage to Cathy's tongue, and that it was now healed in answer to prayer was beyond their capacity to immediately grasp.

Standing next to Cathy when Mom pulled the washcloth away, I vividly remember the wave of awe that washed over me. I think that everybody in the house had an overwhelming sense for that brief time that we were standing on holy ground.

To be certain that Cathy was fully checked out, particularly since

she had swallowed and lost so much blood, Mom took her to the emergency room. When they returned, Mom reported that the doctor who had examined Cathy had said that he saw no evidence that my sister's tongue had ever sustained the sort of damage that Mom had described to him. He had, however, found a small, round scar in the back of Cathy's throat that he had said looked to him like an "old piercing injury" consistent with the story. (Cathy retained that small scar into adulthood.) Apart from that small scar, the doctor had said that he could find nothing wrong with her.

Because the family was engaged in cleaning up the many and large bloodstains on the carpet, the doctor's report was powerful confirmation that God had indeed drawn very near to our family.

The First Grand Lie

Almost from the beginning of human history people have believed a lie. Satan began his involvement with the human race by telling us a lie, and we have believed it ever since. The lie had two intimately related parts: (1) God is withholding some great good from us, and (2) what He says (His word) isn't really true. Put these parts together, and the lie states that God withholds the truth from us *because* He withholds (at least some of) the good from us. Thus Satan asserts that he is the great liberator because he alone wants us to have *all* the good, even that good that God supposedly withholds. Since the first time that humanity began believing Satan's grand lie, the human race has brought upon itself all the woeful results of sin and bondage that are the necessary implications of accepting the satanic lie. But God seeks to build in us faith so that we will not believe such a deception. We are to "know the truth," and the truth is to "set us free" (see John 8:32).

But genuine faith is a very hard thing to come by, and many counterfeits exist. Faith is a function of believing, but I cannot believe just any old thing. I cannot, for example, right here and now just make *myself* believe that I have a million dollars in my pocket.

Faith has something to do with *evidence*. Yet what often passes for “faith” is nothing more than a gullible worldview. So the problem of getting and having *genuine* faith is at its core a problem of *properly* obtaining and evaluating evidence. We need to get very clear about the nature of the proper evidence that can ground genuine faith.

Satan’s first grand lie has proved so successful through the ages that he has never abandoned it. Indeed, it acts as the foundation of his most subtle and creative attacks and temptations even today. To sustain the lie, he employs a vast array of devices designed to make it appear that the evidence is on the side of his lie. These devices range from the enticing “goodness” that appears embedded in temptations, to the crimes he perpetrates or induces us to commit, the long-term effects of which he then blames on a “bad” or “uncaring” or “unjust” God. To those disinclined to believe in God at all (or those entertaining doubts), Satan’s lie takes the form of contrasting the “goodness” in his temptations against the emptiness of the uncaring, disinterested void, and thus he encourages secularists to invent their own ethics and seek for the “goodness” that they can find in the “now.” In all cases, however, Satan continues his age-old strategy of substituting what God called good and true with his own versions. Thus Satan attacks in a multitude of ways, all based upon the first grand lie and all designed to thwart God’s plan to develop faith in us.

Miracles and Their Stories

To thwart these attacks, we “believers” crave ongoing evidence that God is not just “real” but that He is really *near* to us, that He intervenes in our lives, that He *does* have our best good at heart, and that His word *is* true. The drive to find ongoing evidence of God’s nearness and goodness is so strong that many of us unconsciously scour our everyday experiences for examples of it. When we detect possible incidents, we then recount them to others, because the stories are faith-building for both the teller and the listener. Usually our evidences of God’s interaction with us are small and not subject to

close examination: an impression we had, something that turned out right, or an event that seemed almost designed by providence for our personal benefit. Such things provide the everyday evidences of God's interactions in our lives. Occasionally, though, we experience or hear about an event that is more dramatic, one that we call a miracle. A good miracle story trumps a bushelful of doubt, so it is almost a truism that miracle stories build faith. They are the *big guns* that we wheel out to blast holes in Satan's grand lie.

But miracle stories have problems. For example, are the stories we typically recount really of miracles? I mean, in the strong sense of the word? What is a genuine miracle, anyway?

The philosopher and intellectual in me¹ often cringes (mildly) during church testimony sessions as I hear the familiar litany of "miracle stories" supposed to "build our faith." They include the "lost-and-found keys (document, pet, etc.—you fill in the blank)," the "saved from an accident because of a delay in plans," the "saved from an accident because of speeded up plans," the "impression that gave me a witnessing opportunity," etc. The philosopher in me (cringing a little along with the other closet intellectuals in the groups) says (internally), *Yes, I have no doubt that such an experience seemed very faith-building for you, but numerous entirely naturalistic explanations can also account for the phenomenon you just described. I want to hear a story without any apparent naturalistic explanations. I want to hear a story from a truly credible person about an event in which the best explanation² is that God must have intervened.*

The philosopher in me is asking a lot, I know, and, unfortunately such stories are few and far between. The teller has to be credible, and actually that's not an easy bar to get over. And the incident has to be a fairly dramatic intervention in which a supernatural explanation is obviously the best fit.

The Christian that I am, however, recognizes that God's everyday active involvements are usually not dramatically supernatural enough to qualify as clear-cut miracles, although our awareness of even such

“everyday” involvements is crucial to our spiritual well-being. So this book is certainly not an exercise in “miracle one-upmanship” or a snide “My miracles are better than your miracles.” I am not denigrating the less-dramatic experiences of God’s involvement, as, indeed, the most profound experiences I have had with God have been very private and internal and thus not suitable for public scrutiny as miracles. Despite the miracle stories I tell in this book, the most amazing interventions in my life are the ones in which God changes me *inside*, alters my perspectives, transforms my heart, and enables me to see a situation differently and thereby respond to it in harmony with His perspectives. Such experiences would certainly not pass muster when scrutinized by an external “best account” or “best evidence”-seeking philosopher or scientist. But when God changes me inside, subjectively I know that there is nothing in me that could account for the transformation, and I know that the result is God working in me.

But the philosopher in me—in us—must be satisfied too if our “faith” is to be something more than mere gullibility. The philosophical side of all of us, for we are all acting philosophers,³ whether we have received training in it or not, yearns for dramatic and objectively compelling evidence that the event that we have just experienced could have resulted *only* from God’s supernatural intervention. We pray and cry out for Him to heal us and our loved ones from cancer, feed the 5,000 needy people that we know about, and fulfill a myriad of other interventions that we are convinced that we must have. The affirmative answers to such prayers would not only satisfy those immediate needs, but somehow vindicate and validate our relationship with God. And as Christians we deeply crave confirmation of God’s reality and His active involvement in our lives. Both the subjective evidences and the more objective ones are important to us.

The very craving for objective evidence, however, can cause us to “lower the bar,” so to speak, so that events with easy and apparent naturalistic explanations qualify in our own minds as *miracles*. Then we become credulous, gullible, and, as I will discuss, a host of