The Miracles of Healing in the Fourth Gospel

By A. P. Waterson, M.D., M.R.C.P.

On the day of Pentecost Peter described Christ as " a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know ", and thereby linked the preaching of Christ as Saviour with His performance of miracles before His passion. This passage is particularly relevant to those miracles recorded in the fourth gospel, because of the conception of them as signs, which is so characteristic of this gospel. Even Christ's enemies spoke of them as signs (xi. 47, 48). The gospel contains three miracles of healing and one of raising from the dead. Each is recorded in some detail, and set firmly in the context of Our Lord's teaching at the time. The writer suggests that there were multiple miracles of healing, but unlike the synoptists he does not say so explicitly, although it is implied in such references as that of Nicodemus to His " signs " (iii. 2), and of the writer to " signs " in the plural in ii. 23 and, with regard to the healing of disease, in vi. 2, and of the Jewish leaders (xi. 47), who spoke of Him performing " many signs ".

THE MIRACLES AS EVENTS

(1) *The nobleman's son* (iv. 46-54). This took place in Galilee, and the approach was from the father of the boy who was ill. The child was seriously ill with some acute febrile condition which suddenly left him. The boy was healed at a distance, and to the evangelist it was a " sign ", i.e. it was on a par with the turning of the water into wine or the feeding of the five thousand. Sometimes seriously ill children make sudden improvements, but this has the interest of being just at the time when the father had been assured by Christ that all would be well. ἀφίημι is used elsewhere (Matt. iv. 11) of the Devil leaving Christ, and the noun ἄφεσις is used by medical writers, e.g. Hippocrates and Aretæus, to signify recovery, not necessarily a sudden one, though the fact that the household could name the time with some precision suggests that it was a relatively sudden and possibly dramatic one, as does the fact that they came out to meet the father with the news. The result (iv. 53) was that he and his whole household believed in Jesus.

(2) *The man paralysed thirty-eight years* (v. 1-16). This took place in Jerusalem, and the approach came from Christ. The question translated, " Wilt thou be made whole ? " in the Authorized Version is rendered, " Do you want to be healed ? " in the Revised Standard Version, which is nearer the sense of the original, as ὑγιής implies functional efficiency rather than physical completeness. Of course, the older version meant the same at the time when it was made as the modern translation, but the idea of " wholeness " is liable to misinterpretation in present day English. The adjective is also used in Tit. ii. 8 for " sound " speech. In vv. 8 and 9 the man is said to have

been commanded to get up, and "immediately" he became ὑγιής and took up his pallet. It is not clear what was wrong with him, but a paralysis of thirty-eight years' standing is most unlikely to have been cured, even if it were functional in origin, *immediately*. Here it is especially the time sequence, and the time sequence in relation to the command of Christ, which brings to it the stamp of the miraculous. The man is referred to (v. 13) as cured (ἰαθείς), and Christ Himself says, "You are well". The man regarded Him as authoritative (v. 11) and went to worship in the temple (v. 14). There is the interesting and apparently paradoxical command to "sin no more", but it is important that this saying of Christ's should be taken in conjunction with His answer to the disciples' query about the blind man in chapter ix. The healing took place on the Sabbath. No more is mentioned of the man who was healed.

(3) *The man born blind* (ix. 1-14). This took place in Jerusalem, apparently, and also on the Sabbath. The man was congenitally blind, and hence the cause of the blindness must have been an organic one, for hysterical blindness, which is anyway uncommon, is of course never congenital. The initiative in this case came from Christ, and there is the record of His use of spittle and His command to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The restoration of sight was not necessarily absolutely instantaneous, but the man "came back seeing" (v. 7), and in such a case it was instantaneous enough to be regarded as miraculous. In fact, some of his acquaintances were incredulous, and preferred to believe that they had mistaken his identity, until his parents confirmed it. When the truth had been amply demonstrated to the Jewish leaders, they reacted with anger and rejection (v. 34). The result in the man was faith in Christ and worship of Him (v. 38). The spiritual truths contained in this chapter are considerable and important, and concern especially the relation between individual sin and individual sickness.

(4) *The raising of Lazarus* (xi. 1-44). There is no clue to the nature of Lazarus' illness, but it appears to have been an acute one, as the news only reached the disciples shortly before his death. In this case the initiative came from the sisters, not from Christ. The most important fact, and one which may from time to time be questioned, was that Lazarus was *dead*. He had been in the grave four days. The story of this miracle has suffered at the hands of two different expositors. On the one hand, those who use the story merely as an illustration of the new birth (and it makes a very good illustration) are in danger of losing sight of the sheer majesty and unusualness of the achievement. In explaining something else by it, they may blind the minds of men to the thing itself. On the other hand it has been explained on purely natural grounds, e.g. by Smethurst[1], who suggests that it is no more to be wondered at than the cases of resuscitation after cardiac arrest or respiratory failure which occasionally occur in hospitals to-day. But such cases are of an entirely different order from the renewal of life in the body of a man who has been dead *for four days*. To suppose that the two differ only in degree is to belittle the wonder of the miracle which Christ performed here. In the first case the body is, apart from

the one part which has failed, functioning normally, and cannot stand such failure for more than a short time, while in the second irreversible changes have occurred of such a kind that the restoration of life can be looked upon by those acquainted with human physiology as wholly extraordinary and, in these circumstances, as miraculous.

THE MIRACLES AS "MIGHTY WORKS AND WONDERS AND SIGNS"

Christ's miracles are called δυνάμεις because they are manifestations of the power inherent in Him, i.e. it is a word referring to their implications. τέρας is a word which speaks of the wonder and attention which they must command. σημεῖον conveys the idea that they are meant to enlighten the minds of those receptive enough to learn from them.

(1) *The miracles as mighty works* (δύναμις). Christ's power over disease, whether in the form of fever, paralysis or blindness, is only exceeded by His power over death itself, manifested in the raising of Lazarus. The author's restraint in the telling of these stories makes them all the more impressive, as does his restraint in the presentation of Christ's healing work in general. Unlike the Synoptists he never refers explicitly to multiple miracles of healing. When he could have mentioned the healing of Malchus' ear he did not, though in view of the fact that Matthew also does not mention this event, it may well be the case that Luke is to be regarded as the exception for including it, rather than the other two as exceptions for excluding it. Again, no case of demon possession is mentioned, even though these healings must have been some of the most striking which Christ performed, and it does not appear tenable that this is because the author's views on the subject were radically different from the Synoptists, for, as Edersheim has pointed out, there are several references to the subject of demons, and in one case (x. 21) the word δαιμονιζόμενος is used. Finally, in those individual miracles which are recorded, it is as though the author had concentrated on depth on a narrow front. Only four are recorded, but in such detail and of such a kind that they leave little doubt as to their genuinely miraculous nature. "The miracles of Scripture are definite and whole transactions, drawn out and carried through from first to last, with beginning and ending, clear, complete, and compact in the narrative, separated from extraneous matter, and consigned to authentic statements. . . . In Scripture inspiration has selected the true to the exclusion of all others."[2]

(2) *The miracles as wonders* (τέρας). In their own way the three miracles of healing are as wonderful as the raising of Lazarus, for the disabilities of the blind man and the paralytic may be looked on as death in miniature, while the boy's illness may well have carried him off but for the miraculous intervention of Christ. Their very nature as phenomena commands respect, but it is interesting that the only mention of this word in the fourth gospel is in iv. 48, where belief simply because of miracles is condemned by Our Lord.

(3) *The miracles as signs* (σημεῖον). The impressions left by a study of the miracles of healing as recorded in the fourth gospel are of

their meaningfulness, their varied effects upon men, and their timelessness, that is, their significance not only for one time but for all time.

(i) *Their meaningfulness.* In Acts ii. 22 they are said to "approve" Christ, Who is said to be attested by them (ἀποδεδειγμένον), a word which implies that they point away from themselves to Him. Lightfoot[3] points out that in the fourth gospel there is a contrast between the seen and the unseen, the former throwing light on the latter through the signs and through the greatest sign of the life and death of Christ. "His whole life is a sign, in action, of the love of God."

(a) *They attest and illuminate Christ's Messiahship and divinity.* There are passages in the Old Testament which prophesy that the Messiah would perform miracles of healing (e.g. Is. liii. 4, quoted in Matt. viii. 17). Josephus records the expectation of the Jews that the Messiah would do miracles of healing. Nicodemus declared that Christ could not do the things which in fact He did, except God was with Him (iii. 2). Because of His miracles, many people believed in Him (vii. 31), on the grounds that if He were not the Messiah, then Messiah would be hard put to it to better His miracles. The blind man, cross-examined by the Jewish leaders, expressed surprise that they did not think more seriously of the consequences and implications of His ability to open the eyes of the blind (ix. 30, 33). The Lord Himself appealed to His works in general, and this must have implied the miracles of healing *inter alia*, in vindication of His claim to be the Son of God (x. 37, 38). Assuming that the miracles of healing do in fact attest His claim to be the Messiah and hence to be God, then they show something of the character of God, particularly His power, His beneficent intentions for men, and His concern for suffering mankind and His desire to seek and help them.

(b) *They are used by Christ to convey spiritual truth.* The miracles of healing which are recorded in this gospel are the occasion of some of the most important of Christ's teaching on the subject of suffering and sickness. There is teaching on the relation of individual sin to individual illness (ix. 2, 3), and on the use of illness by God (ix. 2, xi. 4), while the story of Lazarus also has lessons about the evocation of faith by suffering and of the Christian teaching about death and the resurrection. Healing on the Sabbath is a live issue in two of the three healing miracles, and there is teaching associated with them which deals with subjects other than the issues of sickness and health, e.g. the teaching of the ninth chapter about the relation between sin and spiritual blindness.

(c) *They invite belief in Him as Saviour.* The evangelist expressly states that the miracles and other signs were written with the purpose of encouraging belief in Christ as Saviour (xx. 30, 31). "The miracle stories . . . are meant in the providence of God to produce awareness, to inform understanding, to establish conviction, to secure active response, all in relation to Jesus; and thus to lead men to the enjoyment of enduring benefit, indeed of eternal life. In other words, as this evangelist sees it, the miracle stories are meant to serve the propagation of the Gospel; they are not meant so to advertise the powers of Jesus as a healer of the sick that other sick people will covet similar benefit and seek physical healing as an end in itself."[4]

(ii) *Their effect upon men at the time.* The miracles of healing show their true colours as " signs " inviting spiritual decision in no way better than in the varied spectrum of reactions which men showed to them, reactions which varied from true faith in Christ to frank antagonism to Him. (a) *True faith*—This is seen in the case of the nobleman and his household (iv. 53). (b) *Reasoned assent*—Nicodemus appears to have been convinced intellectually rather than deeply committed spiritually, at least at first. Others of the Jews reasoned that at least Christ was not demon-possessed (x. 21). (c) *Indecision*—The paralysed man, after his healing, went and told the Jews and was, even if indirectly, responsible for the persecution which the performance of the miracle on the Sabbath occasioned. (See v. 15 and 16, and Westcott on these verses.) (d) *Curiosity*—The acquaintances of the blind man asked him, " Where is He ? " (ix. 12), probably with the same motive as Herod, who, as Luke records (xxiii. 8), " was hoping to see some sign done by Him ". (e) *Self-seeking*—Our Lord condemned the people who followed Him after the feeding of the five thousand, " . . . You seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves " (vi. 26). (f) *Incredulity*—There is a perfectly understandable incredulity, such as occurred with the neighbours of the blind man (ix. 9), but there is also a thoroughly prejudiced and dishonest incredulity, such as the Jews showed in their repeated examination of this man. A medical man of great experience and some insight once described the lot of any new medical discovery in these terms, " When it is first announced, people say that it is not true. Then, a little later, when its truth has been borne in on them, so that it can no longer be denied, they say it is not important. After that, if its importance becomes sufficiently obvious, they say that anyhow it is not true." There is something of the same spirit in the Jews who questioned and harried the man cured of his blindness, and thereby exposed themselves to Christ's denunciation of their blindness to spiritual realities (ix. 39-41). (g) *Frank antagonism*—It is difficult to be precise about the motives of the Jewish leaders which prompted their growing antagonism to Christ, an antagonism which seems to have been aggravated with each successive miracle of healing which is recorded in this gospel. Envy, personal conviction of their own shortcomings, religious bigotry, frustration at the incontravertibility of His success, prejudice, personal hatred—probably all these entered into it. But, below all this, they were showing themselves to be those men of whom the Saviour had spoken to Nicodemus, who " loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil ".

(iii) *Their timelessness.* The miracles of the Bible, and particularly those performed by Our Lord Himself, have a significance for all time. In the story of Dives and Lazarus He condemned the idea of miracles being requested afresh for their evidential value, not only because it would be uncalled for, but also because it would be unlikely to be effective. At that time, they had " Moses and the prophets ", let them hear them (Luke xvi. 29). *A fortiori*, those who now have not only the Old Testament revelation but also the New Testament as well, with the records of the healing and other miracles of Christ, have no right to demand fresh manifestations of the divine power in this

way before they will believe or can persuade others to believe. The relevance of the miracles of healing may be summarized as follows :

(a) *They display the nature and authority of Christ.* Supremely, the miracles of healing teach that the claim of the One Who performed them to be God was a justified claim, and they show His authority over disease and death (Geldenhuys, 1953).[5] If He is God, then His call to men to obey Him and to follow Him cannot be ignored. It may be rejected, but not ignored.

(b) *They clarify the relation between sin and sickness.* The disciples' question in ix. 2 implies that either the blind man or his parents had brought the blindness upon him by sin, and showed the influence of the current rabbinical teaching on the subject. In fact it is only in a very small number of cases that any such direct relationship may be traced. Christ related the man's state and needs to God, and His teaching, even though brief, is extremely important, for the idea of suffering as a punishment for the sins of the individual is a deeply rooted one and is by no means extinct among Christians to-day.

(c) *They draw attention to the use by God of illness.* In the same reply Christ stated that it was within the purposes of God, and for His glory, that the man was blind, and that the miracle that He was to perform was to make plain " the works of God " in him. The sheer boldness of such a claim, unless made by Christ Himself, would be almost incredible. It is no less true to-day that God shows Himself Lord over both sickness and health. He has not, so to speak, been taken unawares by it, but, on the contrary, uses it for effecting His purposes not only in the life of the sufferer but also in those of the onlookers.

(d) *They throw light on the Christian view of death.* When the disciples sought Christ and asked Him to heal Lazarus, they seemed to limit the Lord's power to healing the sick and to forget that He could also raise the dead. The positive lesson from the miracle of the raising of Lazarus, taken at its face value, and in all its grandeur, is that although sickness sooner or later will lead to death, yet even death is neither permanent, nor irreversible, nor invincible. Although Lazarus later died, yet his raising from the dead is a foretaste of that Resurrection of which Christ is the firstfruits.

For a full understanding of the miracles of Christ, as seen in the fourth gospel, they must be viewed both as His works and as His signs. To regard them only as His works may lead to the expectation of exactly similar works to-day, and to a failure to see these miracles in their singularity as a part of the revelation made once for all in Christ. To regard them only as signs may lead to a failure to appreciate their wonder, and to appraise their significance as phenomena. It is because of their wonder as His works that they have a message as His signs.

REFERENCES :

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[4] A. M. Stibbs, Miracles as Signs, *The Christian Graduate* (1956), *ix.*, 2-5.
[5] J. N. Geldenhuys, *Supreme Authority* (1953), p. 24.