

“The True Miracle”

¹⁶Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.”^[a] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

¹⁸Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”^[b]¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.²² This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.”²³ The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone,²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. (Romans 4:16-25)

In this world there are many things we do not know and things we cannot understand. Among these things are two concepts written in the Bible. These are in verse 17, to “give life to the dead” and to “call into being things that were not”.

Confucius said, “We do not yet understand life, how could we understand death”? If we do not know what it means to live, and don’t know where we received life, how can we claim to know death?

Furthermore, bringing a dead person to life is something that we will not be able to fully grasp in the near future. Another thing we cannot understand is the beginning of this universe. We do not have the answer to how a being could be made from nothing. There are many theories to how this world began, but these are only a speculation of the truth.

It is written, "" . We do not learn about anything about this at school, and we do not have any answers to such a phenomenon.

For example, if it was written that Abraham believed in a God who healed his child's fever and made three bundles of wheat from one bundle, then that could have been done by anyone. But what is written in the Bible is something that far exceeds human limitations. Raising the dead to life, and creating a being from nothing. This is the God who Abraham believed.

Two weeks ago I talked about how Abraham at age 75, obeyed God and left his home country with his wife Sarah. At that time, the promise God made with Abraham was this. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing". (Genesis 12:2) And during Abraham's trip, God reappeared to him and said, "To your offspring I will give this land". (Genesis 12:7)

The promises "you will be a blessing" and "to your offspring I will give this land" indicated and implied that Abraham and Sarah would receive a child, and from that child a grandchild, and an abundance of descendants will eventually become a great nation. However, the reality was that Abraham and Sarah have never had a child in their life, and were already of old age at that point.

Many years have passed since Abraham and Sarah left their hometown. However, as they lived their daily lives in anticipation, they saw no sign. Of course not being able to bear a child in old age was

obvious common sense. Sarah did not have the capacity to have a child and it was medically impossible.

In the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation, Abraham and Sarah begin to think of their own plan. They had an idea to have their Egyptian handmaid Hagar bear Abraham's child, and they went on to conduct this plan. This was clearly not God's plan for Abraham of Sarah. God promised that he would make a great nation from the child between Abraham and Sarah.

Eventually, Hagar gave birth to Abraham's son, Ishmael. This occurred 11 years after Abraham and Sarah left their hometown. The Bible records about Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis chapter 16. "Abraham was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael". (Genesis 16:16) And verse 17 begins with, "When Abraham was ninety-nine years old..." (Genesis 17:1)

Abraham-by his faithlessness and impatience had a son, Ishmael. After Ishmael's birth, there is a thirteen-year gap between the chapters in the Bible. And this indicates that there is no recorded conversation between Abraham and God. Perhaps, the existence of God may have disappeared from Abraham's heart during this time. I wonder what kind of thoughts Abraham and Sarah had during these thirteen years. When Ishmael was born, Abraham was 86 and Sarah already 76. No matter how we twist it, it was impossible for the two to have a child.

Countless times Abraham must have thought, "God indeed told me when I was 75 that my descendants would be like the number of the stars. I wonder if that was true. Maybe I misheard God. I have already received a child with Hagar. Ishmael must be the child God promised. But no, Ishmael is the result of our own plan, and is not Sarah's child. But, there is no way that we would receive a child at such an old age... I should stop expecting and thinking about this..." Their thirteen years were probably filled with this kind of thoughts.

However, God did not make his promise null. When Abraham was 99, and Sarah was 90, when most would think they were physically incapable, when their faith in God was fading away, God appeared in front of Abraham and said,

"I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers". (Genesis 17:1-2)

Abraham heard these words, and the Bible writes that Abraham fell facedown before God. And in the next year, truly, as it was promised, Isaac was born.

When we look at Abraham's description in the letter of Romans, which we read today, he, without a doubt, appears to be a man who was constantly faithful in his walk with God. However, like we just talked about, Abraham also had his twists and turns. But, even in his shortcomings, he ultimately came to God and, "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed". (Romans 4:18)

When we read this story we think. This is impossible. How can a baby boy be born between a 90 year old woman and almost 100 year old husband. This has never been heard before. That is definitely true. Everyone please imagine, a 90 year old lady with a stomach that gets bigger and bigger everyday, and eventually gives birth. A married couple going to buy diapers as they push not just their own walker, but also a stroller with a sleeping baby inside. A couple that attends the Keiro-kai accompanied by an infant. If there was a couple like this at our church, a news station would probably come to interview and air on TV, saying "we have never seen anything like this".

God "gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not". (Romans 4:17) And this is exactly what he did for Abraham and Sarah. This we call a miracle.

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Sometimes I hear this. "The Bible is filled with great lessons and is wonderful, but... when I read about the miracles I don't feel as convinced". The Bible is truly filled with accounts of many miracles. Mary's virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus Christ... there are many miracles, and many people cannot get past this. But when you really think about it, the Bible we hold in our hands is a book written about God. Of course there are things in the Bible that are incomprehensible to us. After breaking the 13 years of silence, what does God say to Abraham? Yes, he says this, "I am God Almighty". (Genesis 17:1)

In the Bible, what you think is impossible, what you find hard believing, and if you cannot get past these things, this is a simple and powerful answer for you. God is Almighty.

The explanation for how it was possible for Abraham and Sarah to have a child at such an old age, lies in these words. In the first place, since the Bible is written about an Almighty God, it is much stranger for the Bible to not have a single confusing or incomprehensible passage. We-who have such limited abilities cannot deny an almighty God because of our inability to understand.

If I fixed a broken hand of a coffee mug with glue, would you say "What a miracle"! Definitely not. But if I picked up an ear that was cut off, and reattached that ear onto the person, that is what we would call a miracle. This is something that Jesus actually did in Gethsemane.

If someone scolded their child to stop crying and the child became silent, would we call that a miracle? No. But if someone said, "Be still" and a raging storm instantly became a peaceful lake, we would call that a miracle. This too, Jesus did at the lake of Galilee.

We are astonished by this kind of healing and superhuman acts in nature, and call them miracles. But please remember in your hearts, from God's view, these are not miracles. To God, healing and reattaching a man's ear is equal to our fixing of a broken cup handle.

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To God, silencing a storm is like silencing a child, and to God's eyes it is not a miracle at all. But the reason why we call these acts miracles is because they are beyond human intellect, and surpass the ability of people. But these acts do not surpass God's capabilities, and these things are readily done.

In the New Testament, there is book called the "Gospel of Matthew", written by Matthew the tax collector. I would like to end this message with a story about the implications in this book. In chapter 8 and 9 of this book, there is a record of Jesus's continuous series of miracles.

1. Jesus Heals a Man With Leprosy
2. Jesus Heals the Centurion's Servant
3. Jesus Heals Peter's mother-in-law's Fever and the Drives Out Demons From the Possessed
4. Jesus Calms the Storm
5. Jesus Restores Two-Demon Possessed Men
6. Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man
7. Jesus Heals the Woman with 12 years of Bleeding
8. Jesus Raises a Dead Girl
9. Jesus Heals the Blind
- 10 Jesus Heals the Mute and Demon-possessed Man

The things written here include, "Healing of Leprosy", "Driving out Demons", "Calming the Storm", "Raising from the Dead", and these things we call miracles. These are without a doubt, miracles. But like I mentioned earlier, even as we proclaim these things as miracles, to God these are not miracles. God can do these things with the ease equivalent to flipping through a book or putting on a watch.

But to us, these things written in Matthew are indeed miracles. So let us call these the ten miracles by Jesus Christ.

There is a scholar who says there are actually 11 miracles written here. This scholar says that Matthew intentionally wrote these miracles. No

matter how you look at it, there are only 10 miracles here. But if you read chapters 8 and 9, there is an interesting part between the sixth miracle (Jesus forgiving and healing a paralyzed man) and the seventh miracle (Jesus healing a woman with twelve years of bleeding). The scholar says that what is written between these two miracles, is also a miracle as well. That makes this miracle the actual seventh miracle. In the Bible, the number 7 has a significance of perfection and completion, so it makes this miracle even greater. How did we overlook such a great miracle? What is this seventh miracle? This is what it says in Matthew 9:9-13.

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'^[d] For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew, one of Jesus's twelve disciples who wrote this book, wrote about himself here. He writes of his past as a tax collector. Matthew's former job was to collect taxes for the Roman Empire, which ruled over Jewish Society. He strictly collected heavy taxes from his fellowmen and paid the taxes to the empire that ruled over them. Not only that, but he added on some tax to keep for his own pocket. There was not other job despised by Jewish people like a tax collector was. Tax collectors were constantly called out as sinners.

Matthew was human too; he understood what he was doing. You can easily imagine that he had no person who he can call a true friend. His appearance was alive, but his soul was dead. He was richer than most, but his heart was empty, and he understood that himself more than anyone. Like Abraham, his heart was dead. And Matthew knew that.

But Jesus called out to Matthew. “Follow me”. And to these words, Matthew got up and followed Jesus. That was the beginning of his new life. He found out that he was made alive by Jesus. That he was born again. That from his empty heart, a fountain of life was pouring out. Matthew met a God who, brought life to his dead state, and formed joy from his empty heart.

Matthew in writing this book, looked back to this event and wrote it in between the “healing of the paralyzed man” and “healing of the woman with twelve years of bleeding”. This story was not just a regular event but a moment Matthew affirmed as a miracle, so much so that he wrote this as the seventh story. Among Jewish people, seven is a number that signifies completion. In other words, Matthew writes that, among all of the miracles, the fact that I was given life, was given hope, and accepted as righteousness is the true miracle.

Paul writes about this past verse 23 which we are looking at today. “²³The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification”. (Romans 4:23-25)

Just like Paul writes, “the words were written not for him alone”, these things were also for Matthew the tax collector, and the amazing thing is that these things are for us as well.

You have probably noticed by now that the many miracles Matthew records; the healing of leprosy, driving out of demons, calming of the storm, resurrection from the dead, are all miracles to us, but not such to God.

But what about Matthew’s conversion? There is something different about this and the ten miracles. The ten miracles were all performed by the power of God alone. However, Matthew’s conversion was not only an intervention by God, but also a response by his free will. Even

from God's point of view, Matthew's repentance is something that even God would call a miracle.

This is how we understand the word. What does the Bible say about one person repenting their sins and choosing to live with God? Jesus said, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents"(Luke 15:10). There is no reference to a shout of praise by angels when Jesus healed a man, raised someone from the dead, or calmed a storm. I have repeated myself many times, but these things are not considered miracles by God, or even the angels, and are not equal to shouts of joy. But when one person repents, that one-day, that one time, when you return to the Lord, not only that, but if you accept the Lord in your heart, here, today, then behold, the angels are rejoicing in heaven. Why? Because that is a true miracle.

The fact that you, everyone is here at church this morning does not appear as a miracle in our eyes. Although, if there is someone, who in his or her heart, repents, believes in God, and makes a decision to walk the rest of their life with God, then that is a miracle. The person sitting next to you may not notice. But, in heaven, all of the angels are carefully observing and are shouting and rejoicing.

I was having a conversation with a person the other day, and I came to understand something. What is the hardest thing in this world? Is it diamonds? No. It is our hearts. We try to understand everything in our heads, and what we cannot understand, we toss aside. We always desire for everything to go our way, and when something goes wrong, we always cast blame on someone or something else. And God speaks to these closed hearts. But, we do not listen to God's word, and don't accept him into our hearts. But their comes a time when we come to our senses, we face God and return to him. For one sinner to return to God, two things are necessary, God's approach and our response. Since our response is essential, this becomes a miracle.

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Abraham, who was physically and spiritually worn-ready to give up, Matthew, who had a lot of wealth, but not alive in a true sense, they both put faith in God's works and got back on their feet. And God revives these two, and saves them from their dead state. A sure hope was born in their empty hearts. And this also happens in our lives. We who believe in God-who raised Jesus Christ from the grave, are raised to life. I pray and hope from the bottom of my heart that today, tomorrow, in this church, and everywhere around the world, that this miracle will occur. Let us pray.

Translated by Kou Okura