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AND SEIZE OUR DONKEYS

They were in a foreign country. They had previously been accused of spying. This time they had been invited to the house of the vice president for dinner. As they entered the room the scripture says, "And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, "It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys." (Gen 43:18, English Standard Version)

When Joseph's brothers were in Egypt, facing what they thought was certain punishment for theft and espionage, what did they fear? Logically they feared "that he may seek occasion against us, and fall upon us, and take us for bondmen." But then they add, "and our donkeys also." If they were going to be imprisoned, what use had they for their donkeys? They had a right to be worried for their own lives, but why think, at such a time, about their donkeys?

Their donkeys were important. They represented wealth. They were the means by which they hoped to take grain back to their father in Canaan. It is probable that they had brought many donkeys. But when faced with a life and death situation, why worry that their donkeys would be seized. It is not like those facing death who worry about their pets; the donkeys would be cared for.

Perhaps many people are like Joseph's brothers. They worry about the wrong things. They worry about the trivial when it is time, if ever it is time, to worry about the important things. A mother rushes to the hospital because a child has been in an accident, and all of a sudden she worries that they did not turn off the television. The family leaves on a trip for a week, and somebody asks, "Did we turn off the burner on the stove?" Even though they had not used the stove that morning.

Sometimes, as in those examples, worry about trivialities is a method of release. We know we cannot do anything about our situation, so we reduce it to the smaller worry so we don't have to face the bigger one. Perhaps this was the case with Jacob's sons. They acknowledge the possibility of the greater punishments, but have to worry about the donkeys so they don't have to face the other.

At other times, perhaps, people merely have their priorities in the wrong order. Those who have taught others the gospel see this frequently. The student acknowledges the seriousness of sin and the absolute need for Jesus as savior. He or she may fully understand that a failure to follow God has serious consequences in this life and for eternity. The teacher thinks they have the person ready for the final step, and then the student says, "But if I do this, I am saying that everything my parents taught me is wrong." There is nothing the person can do about the parents, but this relative triviality becomes an excuse not to do the important thing for himself or herself. Jesus knew that this might happen. "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me." (Matt 10:37-38) Some things are too important to let smaller worries get in the way.

As the story of Joseph's brothers continues, they find that they have nothing to worry about. They eat a fine feast. Then verse 3 of the next chapter even points out that they were sent on their way, "they, and their donkeys." Not only was their worry about themselves a waste of energy, so also their worries about their donkeys.

Whether the trivial or the important, so often worry is over something out of our control. The brothers had no recourse to appeal whatever Joseph chose to do to them. They could not even save their own donkeys. Again, the Master addresses such worries.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matt 6:33)

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THE HANUKKAH MIRACLE

Hanukkah (December 21-28 in 2011) is commonly considered a celebration of a miracle. What that miracle was may be in dispute. (Is it the miracle of deliverance from a mighty tyrant by a small guerrilla army? Or is it the miracle of replenished oil, as the tradition from two hundred years after the fact would make it?) What is not in dispute is that it is a celebration of something that either was or seemed miraculous.

It seems that miracles themselves are in dispute today. Some are ridiculed for believing in, or celebrating with or without belief, the miracle of Hanukkah. Miracles imply a power higher than nature, and many in today's world do not want to acknowledge such a power. The miracles of Torah are either ridiculed, minimized, or denied. Those who claim miraculous powers today are considered crackpots or moneygrubbers. It seems that there is no middle ground in the debate over miracles. Either they didn't or don't exist, or denying their existence is tantamount to denying faith in God.

There are three common tendencies today in relation to how we view miracles. The first is that miracles used to occur, but have not done so since biblical times. They had their value once, but today their main value is that they are recorded in scripture. A second is to explain miracles away. There must be some scientific explanation

When someone avoided an accident because the bicycle chain slipped off the gears, was it miracle, or poor maintenance?

for what happened. The other is to call things miracles which are not miraculous. Perhaps that last begs a definition. A miracle in the Bible was an occurrence that was not in the course of natural law. Even though God created the laws of nature, once they were set in motion a miracle would be, by definition, anything not able to be explained by those laws (either then or now). Miracles were often also used as signs to either believers (to confirm faith in God) or unbelievers (to cause faith in God).

When is a miracle not a miracle

By that definition, having a baby is not a miracle. It is a wondrous event, but rarely is it miraculous. A virgin birth would be miraculous. Perhaps a situation in which

the baby should have died but it does not is miraculous. If a person is involved in an automobile accident and walks away unhurt it could be because he wore his seatbelt and had functioning air bags; in which case it would not be miraculous. If the same crash would normally kill a person, but this one walked away unscathed, perhaps a miracle happened.

There is a danger in crediting as miracles those things that are not. When we see everything as miraculous we become inured to the truly divine. When everything becomes a miracle, then nothing is miraculous. If what is natural is a miracle, why do we need God? What can he do for us that we cannot do ourselves. We cannot live on an even plain. We need highs and lows. Miracles are the highs; the mundane are the level spots and the lows. When we see miracles in every little thing, we flatten the high spots and remove challenge from our lives.

If miracles happen today, we don't always recognize them. And sometimes they are so subtle we can't even prove it was a miracle. If a bicyclist has his chain slip off the gears so he has to stop and fix it, and then later comes upon an accident that just occurred, did a miracle save him from that accident? Or was it merely poor maintenance? The difference between the miracles of the Bible and some possible miracles today is that the Biblical miracles were obvious and unmistakable. When a widow and her sons pour oil from one jar into many larger jars until they run out of containers, that is clearly a miracle. When a man is revived on an operating room table, that is less clearly a miracle.

Do we need a clear miracle to see God? Why not recognize him in the results of past miracles. The creation is the greatest miracle of all. All we need to recognize God's power is to look around. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork." (Ps 19:1) God's word to man recounts many miracles that were truly miracles. If we believe that the scriptures are God's word to man, we have the miracles to confirm or cause faith.

Miracles ended

Does that mean that we no longer have miracles today? Not necessarily. Sometimes crediting the ordinary as miraculous hides the miraculous in the extraordinary. Calling the birth of a baby a miracle may actually detract from the miracles that do happen.

The tendency is to believe that miracles had their day, and then stopped when the scriptures stopped. That may be entirely true. It may be true to a certain extent. Or it may be that we are blinded to the miracles that occur today. Could it be that we are like the Pharaoh of Moses'

day. Moses performed miracles before him, but it was not until the third plague that his magicians could not duplicate the miracles. After all, if there are frogs everywhere, who can't pull a frog out of his hat?

Certainly it appears from the scriptures that miracles waxed and waned. There were many miracles around the time of the giving of the Law and the conquest of Canaan. For a while it seemed that miracles stopped happening, or at least happened less frequently. Then we find a number of miracles during the Divided Kingdom, particularly in the North. Elijah and Elisha were noted miracle workers. Hezekiah was miraculously healed. This was a time when people were ignoring God, and God does not like to be ignored. Some miracles occurred particularly toward the end of the Babylonian captivity, when unbelieving nations were about to see that they were God's tools in the rebuilding of the Temple. And so it seemed to come in cycles.

Have we been in a down cycle for seemingly two millennia? Or have miracles continued during this period of time and we have not recognized them? Since the miraculous revealing of God's will in scripture closed long ago, we cannot answer that question. But just as it may be dangerous to credit as a miracle that which occurs naturally, so it may also be dangerous to credit as natural that which occurs miraculously.

Pharaoh was easily deceived by his magicians. But are we to aspire to be like Pharaoh, or like Moshe? Maybe God is giving us instruction through miracles, and we just are not listening. "Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house." (Ezek 12:2)

Explaining the miracles

Today many people try to explain away the miracles of the Bible by assigning natural processes. The flood (Gen 6-9), it seems, was not universal, but just a local flood that Noah though was universal. (Never mind that it killed all people on earth.) The plague of locusts (Ex 10) was a periodic occurrence, and Moses knew it was coming, but the intelligent Egyptians somehow missed it. The splitting of the *Yam Suf* (Red Sea) (Ex 14) was due to an unusually high tide in the Arabian Sea, but how that left dry ground on which Israel crossed is anybody's guess. And the list goes on and on. In our "enlightened" age, people want scientific explanations even for those things for which there can be no scientific explanation. And if you can't explain it scientifically, then it must not have happened. The six-day creation is an allegory. The battle was so intense that it just seemed to Joshua that the sun stopped in its course. (Josh 10) And Hezekiah must have been delirious with fever when he thought the sun backed up on the steps he used as a sundial. (2 Kgs 20)

This also is a danger. If crediting everything as miraculous threatens belief in God, this does so even

more. We live in an age when there is no god but science. Everything can be explained by science, and if it cannot be explained now it will be in the future. Science is god, so God must be scientific or he must not exist.

Although there is a natural tendency to explain away a miracle, we actually need miracles. This is especially true in the spiritual realm. We need a God who is more powerful than anything we know or can know. If there is no such God, then the universe as we know it is everything, and it is a very cold universe. If we don't have a God of power, a lawgiver, then all we have is anarchy. The highest good (and the highest god) is my own existence, and watch out when your own existence threatens mine. On the other hand, a God who can create is a God who can enforce his laws, and punish those who violate them. The miraculous shows God to be greater than nature, and greater than my nature.

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But we also need miracles on a lower level. Maybe that is why we see the miraculous in the day-to-day. We really don't want science to be absolute. Immanuel Velikovsky was the most well-known of the catastrophists. Although mainstream science rejects his theories, nevertheless he popularized the idea that history is a series of catastrophic events. Life, history, and even science, does not continue in a steady stream, but rather, like literature, builds to climaxes and returns to a lower level. Although science in general rejects the catastrophists, people as a whole see that model in their own lives. When the climax comes, we hope for a *dues ex machine* in the form of a miracle to set things right. We need miracles, and therefore we need God.

Hanukkah is a celebration of the miraculous and the seeming miraculous. Never mind that it was hundreds of years before someone wrote down the miracle of the oil that is celebrated in the Hanukkah lights. Whether the miracle happened or did not happen, in our minds the miracle happened, and that is important. It says that God keeps his light shining in a world of darkness. And even if you reject that miracle, it celebrates a victory by a badly outnumbered and outrained force in defense of the truth of God. That someone was willing to stand up for God in the face of certain death seems miraculous to us. But it is a miracle that happens every day.

SEVEN TIMES SEVENTY

Forgiveness. We all want it. Many don't want to give it. We think we know what the Bible says about it. But do we?

Take, for instance, what Jesus said in answer to Peter's question about how many times to forgive. Especially because of a recent song, many would say that Jesus told us to forgive "seven times seventy times." Some might even facetiously add, "But the 491st time, watch out." Take a look at the passage, though.

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22)

Luke, in what may be a parallel passage, or may be another time Jesus taught on the subject, quotes it slightly differently.

Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. (Luke 17:4)

Notice that in the account in Luke it is a daily forgiveness. That is, one cannot say, "I forgive him seven times this week/month/year, so I am under no obligation to forgive further." Each day starts a new count, if one is counting. Seven times in a day. Allowing for six and half hours of sleep, that comes out to once every two and a half hours. One or the other, or both, just aren't learning anything from this experience. If you give a person the opportunity to sin against you every couple of hours, you need to make some changes. But you also need to forgive.

Taken with the verse in Matthew, that would mean this one individual is sinning against you seven

times a day for over two months. While seventy times seven is probably hyperbole, even if it were an outside limit to forgiveness, don't you think that a person who got forgiven 490 times in a ten-week period might get the idea that there is something different about this person that he is sinning against? Yes, some might take advantage, but even the average not-so-bright but well-intentioned person might take notice of something like this. Jesus never said that nobody would take advantage of our following him.

Another thing to notice in the passage in Luke is that forgiveness may be conditional. Jesus specified forgiveness if he "turn again to thee, saying, I repent." Sometimes it is seen in court that remorse, or the lack of it, may be a mitigating factor in determining whether a convicted person is given the maximum penalty under law, or a lesser sentence. There are also cases where the family of a murdered individual may express forgiveness even if there is no apparent remorse. That may be going beyond the requirement, which is even better than meeting minimum standards. Nevertheless, it appears that our obligation to forgive is contingent on the sinner's request for forgiveness. What is not considered, however, is the sincerity of the request. If the person asks for forgiveness, give it. Do not judge whether he is really sorry. Even after he seeks forgiveness for the same thing every two hours for ten days, forgive when it is requested.

If we want to go beyond the minimum, we can seek to be like God. He forgives, whether or not we ask. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son [continually] cleanseth us from all sin." (1 Jn 1:7) Maybe that is the point of Jesus' "seven times seventy." By the time we reach twenty or thirty times we have made it such a habit that forgiveness will become automatic.