



INTRODUCTION
“IT WAS A MIRACLE!”

The doctors couldn't explain it," the father jubilantly proclaimed. "It was a miracle!" The pastor nodded as exclamations of "Praise the Lord!" echoed round about me.

With the TV cameras rolling, it was certainly a joyous occasion. A young father and mother, holding their precious one-year-old daughter, stood on the stage of a well-known Southern California church. Several hundred people sat transfixed, listening to the gripping story. I, too, sat in the audience that Sunday morning, convinced by a friend to visit the illustrious church.

According to the parents, their little girl had been born with a "hole in the aorta." The aorta, the largest artery in the body, is a cane-shaped, elastic vessel that moves blood away from the heart. Specialists, administering medications to try to close this "hole," warned the parents that surgery might be necessary. The parents, understandably horrified at the thought, pleaded with the doctors to allow the prayer option first.

The doctors agreed.

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The next day the doctors met with the family. The little girl had not improved, and a scalpel was offered to correct the potentially life-threatening condition. The parents pleaded again with the doctors, this time begging them to recheck this hole.

And so the doctors did. What they found was cause for joyous celebration! The hole had miraculously closed! Surgery was no longer needed, and their daughter made a complete recovery! Smiling in my seat, I was genuinely happy for the parents who were dedicating their little girl to God that morning. To almost everyone in the building and in TV land that day, this was undeniable evidence that a miracle had occurred. Imagine—a hole in the body's largest artery closing without medical intervention!

It certainly seems amazing, doesn't it? But what would you say if I told you that this "hole closing" happens approximately four times a second, 250 times a minute, 360,000 times a day around the world? If I told you that almost every human alive on this planet had his or her own hole closed indirectly by God, would you still feel inclined to label this healing a miracle?

What you probably don't know, unless you are a medical professional, is that God has cleverly designed our bodies with this hole. Actually, it's not even a hole. It's called a *ductus arteriosus*; a duct that in fetal life connects the aortic arch with the left pulmonary artery. Its purpose is to shunt blood away from the lungs, delivering it instead to the feet and umbilical arteries. When the baby is born, this duct usually constricts, and the blood is delivered instead to the lungs for oxygenation. Occasionally the duct fails to completely close. (Dr. David Connuck, et al., showed that this duct is open in 45 percent of healthy newborn infants in the first sixty hours of life, and it is still open at two to six months of age in 4.5 percent of normal infants.¹) If the opening is large enough to pose a health threat, indomethacin (a medication) is usually given to the infant to inhibit prostaglandin synthesis and help close it. If this fails, and the condition is serious, surgery is usually necessary.

So the questions naturally arise: Did this little girl's ductus arteriosus close on its own as normally happens? Was it the medications that helped close the duct? Or was it God's supernatural intervention prompted by all the prayers?²

We'll never know for sure, will we? Seemingly miraculous healings often don't seem all that miraculous when we understand the mechanical workings of God's greatest handiwork. I could easily fill this book with similar "medical marvels" that you might think are definite miracles, but which in actuality are scientifically studied events with rational explanations.

According to a *Newsweek* poll conducted at the turn of the millennium, "84 percent of adult Americans say they believe that God performs miracles and nearly half (48 percent) report that they have personally experienced or witnessed one."³ Whether or not you believe God still performs miracles, you would have to agree that we live in a world obsessed with the paranormal. To fill the church pews on a Sunday morning, all a preacher has to do is announce beforehand that his sermon series will focus on miracles, angels, or demons. To empty pews, all he has to do is announce that his sermons will focus on the holiness of God.

But do miracles really show off, to the greatest extent, God's love, power, and dominion?

Well-known Bible teacher Dr. John MacArthur writes:

In many ways the daily outworking of providence, in which God constantly must orchestrate millions of details and circumstances, is a greater miracle than what we ordinarily think of as a miracle.⁴

The influential people God brings into our lives at opportune moments, the key resources he supplies us with to accomplish his precise goals, his mind-boggling attention to "millions of details and circumstances" to bring about his perfect sovereign plan for our lives—all of this displays God's genius, power, dominion, wisdom, and love much more than "comparatively uncomplicated miracles."⁵ Therefore, it is a "greater exercise of faith," insists MacArthur, to believe that God will work everything out by providence, than to believe that God will instantaneously fix our problems with one or two miracles.⁶

Some Christians would disagree, however. The assumed "God miracles" of ordinary tooth fillings and crowns being instantaneously turned into gold during church services and the gold "glory dust" phenomenon

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whereby God supposedly showers down actual gold glitter on his faithful flock have become all the rage in some churches. Even if God were responsible for these crowd-drawing stunts, would he be all that impressed with his handiwork? I highly doubt it. If people could truly understand the awesomeness of God's providence in their day-to-day lives, they would see just how insignificant such "miracles" are.

No doubt, many of you have been eagerly looking forward to this book in the series. For the sake of space, I've decided to focus attention specifically on *miracles of physical healing*. To better understand why God allows us to suffer, we must first critically examine the subject of miracles. We must ask some key questions: What is a genuine miracle? Is it God's sovereign will that everyone be 100 percent healthy? How exactly does God heal us? Is God still doing miracles of healing today? If so, why isn't he doing more? How common are genuine miracles of healing?

Some, however, might wonder if it's right as Christians to question the origin of the "miracles" allegedly happening all around us. I've spoken with many hurting individuals over the years who have been made to feel like second-rate Christians by friends and relatives because they took seriously Paul's warning to "examine everything *carefully*" (1 Thess. 5:21 NASB). Instead of flat out accepting all the miracle stories we hear every day as the gospel truth, these individuals have carefully studied the Scriptures and closely examined several modern investigative studies on the subject. What has been their reward? They have been criticized, rebuked, humiliated, and made to feel that their faith is full of gaping holes the size of boulders.

Yet I've noticed something very interesting through the years. The same individuals who have taken Paul's admonition to "examine everything *carefully*" in spiritual matters, particularly miracles of physical healing, are often those who have heeded the same words of caution in most areas of life. (I don't think Paul was referring only to doctrinal issues in this verse.) It doesn't matter if it's spectacular testimonials of the paranormal, Internet hoaxes, get-rich-quick schemes, or the exaggerated claims of some alternative medicine "cures" flooding the market, these individuals want to uncover the truth. They don't fall for all the hype and falsehood bombarding our senses every day; they don't

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let experiences or testimonials dictate what is truth; rather, they carefully examine and reexamine every detail that comes their way. God has blessed these believers with a real love for the truth—*his truth*. They are merely exercising their spiritual gift of prophecy by trying to discern what is of God and what isn't. Doesn't God warn us in the Scriptures that false prophets will come and deceive people with counterfeit signs and wonders (see 2 Thess. 2:9–10)? Why then do Christians in some denominations harshly scold those who are doing what God commands everyone to do?

If you are the type of person who will go to any length to uncover the *real truth* behind a matter, then I want to commend you for your diligence in searching out the truth—no matter how many other Christians will try to put you down in the process. It takes absolutely *no* faith to believe in everything we can see and hear. But it takes real faith and courage to trust in God for what we can't see. For God tells us, “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

This is, undeniably, a precariously sensitive subject that some churches and authors wouldn't dare touch with a ten-foot Bible. For if we conclude by the end of the book that miracles of healing aren't occurring today, or that they are uncommon, I will have angered many who have based their theology on the idea that God guarantees us health. If, instead, we conclude that miracles are commonplace, and that God wills every believer to be well, I will have offended many dear saints who are suffering terribly with physical sickness. They'll wonder, “If God is doing so many miracles today, why isn't he healing me?”

It is inevitable that I will offend someone in this book. Nonetheless, the apostles never backed down from seeking out and proclaiming the truth—and neither will I.

LOOKING BEFORE WE JUMP

Before we jump with both feet into the heart of this issue, I want to clarify a few things. First of all, I firmly believe that God is still performing miracles of healing today. Second, I firmly believe that we cannot go

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another step on this all-important journey until we first define a miracle. The term *miracle* has taken on many meanings in our age. World-famous surgeon and author Dr. Paul Brand correctly pointed this out in a personal letter to me:

The word “miracle” is commonly used amongst Christians as meaning something wonderful that has happened in somebody’s life that is attributable to God’s answer to their prayers.⁷

Answers to prayers are always wonderful, whether or not they can be explained by natural forces. (Understanding how amazing it is that a “hole in the aorta” can instantly close in a newborn baby might tempt one to term the whole process miraculous!) I want to make it absolutely clear that God can and often does, by his Holy Spirit, in response to prayer, bring about healing in our physical bodies by first healing our spiritual and emotional illnesses. When our Creator helps rid us of our guilt, anger, bitterness, and depression, our physical bodies are allowed to heal.

You must understand, though, that for purposes of discussion, there is an important difference between a *physical miracle* and what some might term a *spiritual miracle*. Both come from God’s supernatural power, but a *physical miracle* involves the unexplainable changes in the physical existence and arrangement of molecules—whereas a *spiritual miracle* does not.

I particularly like this scriptural definition of a miracle given by Dr. John MacArthur:

A miracle is an extraordinary event wrought by God through human agency, an event that cannot be explained by natural forces.⁸

I will demonstrate shortly how this definition is essential to choosing the right paths on our quest into understanding God more.

In this chapter and the chapters to come, I will concentrate mainly on the fleshly aspects of healing. Indeed, spiritual miracles, such as those seen when God saves a person out of sin, happen almost every minute

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of every day—and often in response to prayer. And they are true miracles because no mortal or natural process can quicken a sinner from death to spiritual life. Yet I will demonstrate in the end with medical studies why it is so important for us to differentiate between a true miracle of *physical healing* and one of *spiritual healing*. Regardless of the differences, prayer is vitally important for healing—spiritual *and* physical. And whether or not a particular healing fits the strict definition of a miracle, *prayer makes a difference!*

If you wish to term any and every answer to your prayer as “miraculous,” then by all means do so. In the pages of this book, however, I will use the miracles of Christ and the apostles as a template in carefully examining the “miraculous healings” taking place on the faith-healing circuit today. Millions of people in the church are asking some pretty tough questions about miracles—questions that need to be addressed from Scripture and from a medical standpoint. If you were dying from a rare disease, you would want an experienced medical doctor to carefully examine your body along with every detail of your history, lab reports, and radiological studies to ascertain the truth. In tackling the important topic of miracles, we should be no less thorough in diligently searching out God’s truths. For as the apostle Paul strongly encourages us, we need to “examine everything *carefully*” (1 Thess. 5:21 NASB).

Which is precisely what we will do.

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People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know.

—ACTS 2:22 NLT



1

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Before we can compare what happened two thousand years ago to what is taking place in faith-healing crusades all around the world, we have to first ask the obvious question: Did the miracles recorded in Scripture actually occur?

Because 84 percent of Americans believe that God performs miracles—and approximately the same percentage believe Christ rose from the dead¹—it’s probably safe to conclude that the majority of Americans accept all or most miracles detailed in the Scripture as truth. To scientists who believe that the laws of nature prove otherwise, Loren Haarsma, a PhD physicist writing in *The World & I*, says, “Scientists can never rule out the possibility that miracles occurred in the past.”² You can’t prove or disprove an ancient miracle in a modern test tube.

As incredible as it may seem, some folks who believe that God had something to do with fashioning the universe also believe that he lacked enough power to pull off any real miracles afterward (known as “hard” deism). That’s like believing the gifted Michelangelo painted the famous

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vaulted ceiling in the Sistine Chapel—but that later he couldn't paint a happy face on the side of a tree!

Because the results of most public-opinion surveys indicate that most of my readers likely accept by faith the existence of an all-powerful and personal God, we won't spend any more time on the question, Did miracles occur? Rather, we will direct our mental energy to the crucial questions: *Why* did the miracles in Scripture occur? What was God's purpose for curing the army general Naaman of leprosy, raising Lazarus from the dead, and making the blind to see? Is this the norm for today?

Studying the Scriptures, you'll notice that miracles, wrought at the hands of God's messengers, were primarily clustered in three brief ages of Bible history, during the lives of

1. Moses and Joshua
2. the prophets Elijah and Elisha
3. Christ and the apostles (after Christ was thirty years of age).

We have no record of healing miracles occurring in large numbers, anywhere, any time, at the hands of just any saint. C. S. Lewis states it plainly: "God does not shake miracles into Nature at random as if from a pepper-caster."³ Only certain messengers of God were used to perform divine miracles, referred to as "signs and wonders" throughout the Old and New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 12:12 we read, "The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—*were done* among you with great perseverance." Note here that "were" is past tense, and that this verse was written in a time when the apostles were still alive.

Why *were* these signs and wonders performed?

God used these supernatural feats as signs to the people, identifying and authenticating the credentials of his earthly spokesmen. The Gentiles openly responded to the gospel after seeing Paul perform many signs (see Rom. 15:18–19; Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:4). Christ himself did numerous wonders and signs to demonstrate the truth of his message (John 10:24–25; 20:30–31; Acts 2:22). Even in the Old Testament, when Elijah raised from the dead a widow's son, the widow proclaimed, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD

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from your mouth is the truth” (1 Kings 17:24). With the canon of Scripture incomplete, and with so many false prophets buzzing around, citizens had difficulty separating God’s truth from human imagination. But by orchestrating an inexplicable, miraculous event through his prophet, or apostle, or his own Son, God effectively channeled his truth to the people.

To accomplish this, God performed miraculous healings that blew away the magic, trickery, and psychosomatic healings of his competition—namely Satan and the false prophets. If you examine Christ’s healing ministry in detail, you’ll see exactly what I mean.

When Christ instantaneously healed a paralytic, lowered through the roof, the people praised God, declaring, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2:12). No wonder. I’ve cared for many paralyzed patients, some on ventilators completely paralyzed from the neck down, and never once have I seen anyone suddenly get up and start walking around. (Nor have I ever seen or heard of a faith healer walking into a hospital and healing such a patient.)

In spinal-cord paralysis, the impulses from the brain that normally inhibit a muscle from firing are lost—resulting in disfiguring and debilitating muscle, ligament, and tendon contractures (shortenings) that can be remedied only by surgery, medications, botox or phenol injections, and/or hours of intensive rehabilitation. Even if the paralytic whom Christ healed didn’t have an irreparable spinal-cord lesion or an incapacitating muscle or nerve disorder, he would still require weeks of rehab to overcome the debilitating muscular wasting. Either way, this healing is without a medical explanation—it’s supernatural, above nature.

When Christ restored the sight of a man born blind, the Pharisees couldn’t explain it (John 9:1–34). You see, a child’s brain, part of the central nervous system, continues to lay down structural neuronal pathways till at least age two. If you cover an infant’s eye with a patch for too long, the brain never recovers, resulting in permanent blindness in that eye. For an adult born blind to fully gain sight, these undeveloped parts of the brain, particularly the occipital cortex, would have to instantaneously and completely regenerate. Here too was another healing without medical explanation.

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In addition, Christ immediately healed a man of leprosy (Matt. 8:1–4). Admittedly, the term *leprosy* in the New Testament probably described many skin conditions, so this man may have had leprosy as we know it today or he may have been suffering from a disease such as chronic psoriasis. Jesus healed crowds of people, and no doubt one or more had true leprosy. Victims of this cruel disease usually have skin nodules, plaques, and/or rashes. Because of peripheral nerve involvement, leprosy patients gradually lose feeling in their limbs and skin appendages, causing them to be broken, worn off, torn off, or badly ulcerated. Instantaneously healing such bodies would be miraculous. Even if what the healed individual had was your garden-variety chronic psoriasis and it disappeared instantly, that would still be a miracle. Again, this healing defied all medical explanation.

Perhaps Christ's greatest miracle was seen in raising Lazarus from the grave (John 11:11–44). When the brain in a warm environment is deprived of oxygen for more than three or four minutes, there is often irreversible brain damage. (In extremely cold environments the brain can go without oxygen for much longer time periods before damage occurs. That's why you sometimes hear of individuals falling through the ice and being pulled out and resuscitated twenty minutes later with few—or no—adverse effects.) Scientists are scrambling to figure out how to regenerate cells in an adult's central nervous system—but so far without success. For Lazarus, dead for three days in a warm tomb, to be raised to complete health was truly beyond medical rationalization. And Christ raised not one, but at least two other individuals to life—one right out of a coffin on the way to his funeral (Luke 7:14–15; 8:49–56)!

Christ's miracles of healing had these distinctive characteristics:

1. *Christ healed completely:* Christ had no half cures. The paralytic didn't hobble away; the leper didn't go back to the priest with only a few skin nodules here and there; and the blind man didn't need glasses or a seeing-eye camel to find his way around.
2. *Christ healed immediately:* Except for three instances, where the healing took place in a matter of minutes, all

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miracles happened instantaneously—not days or weeks later.

3. *Christ healed in public:* His healing ministry was not limited to certain prearranged sites. He didn't need an emotionally supercharged atmosphere or an "anointing" in a crusade or church to heal the sick. He went up and down the countryside and streets healing people in a seemingly random manner. (Of course, he foreknew exactly whom he would heal.)
4. *Christ healed mostly visible organic disease:* He was not intimidated by withered body parts, the blind, or people in the grave. His miracles were so convincing that not even his critics of the day could refute them.
5. *Christ healed even those without faith:* Christ healed without partiality, healing even those who apparently had little or no faith. You'll remember that the man Christ healed of blindness didn't even really know who Christ was. "He replied, 'Whether [Christ] is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!'" (John 9:25; see also vv. 35–36).
6. *Christ healed with a purpose:* His purpose was to authenticate his messianic claim (John 5:36), to show the people that he had the authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6), to prove that his message came from God (Acts 2:22), and through it all to launch the beginning of his church and bring more glory to God (Eph. 2:19–22; John 11:4). Christ didn't heal everyone (John 5:3–5); nor did he heal on demand (Matt. 12:38–40).

Christ healed without bias—any type of person, anywhere, instantaneously, totally, any disease, in plain sight of everyone. The disciples' healings followed suit. Peter and Paul completely healed the lame (Acts 3:7; 14:8–10), and both apostles raised the dead (Acts 9:40; 20:9–12).

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The apostles' healings were so numerous and so convincing that not even their enemies could deny them (Acts 4:15–17).

But as Dr. John MacArthur points out, after Pentecost (the birth of the church), “no miracle ever occurred in the entire New Testament record except in the presence of an apostle or one directly commissioned by an apostle.”⁴ Like Christ, the apostles didn't perform miracles simply for the physical benefit of the recipients. Miracles were never intended to make all believers healthy or to be a last-ditch effort by God to bring a person to saving faith. (A miracle by itself will *never* bring someone to genuine faith in God [see John 6:65].) Neither is there evidence in Scripture that the miracles performed by the apostles were to continue after they died. Miracles of healing had a very specific purpose: to authenticate the apostles (2 Cor. 12:11–12) and their message from God, and therein build the foundation for the church (Eph. 2:19–22)—the spiritual framework supporting the very life of the body of genuine believers.

Neither were miracles performed for the *sole reason* that Christ had compassion on the people. On a few occasions in the gospels it specifically says that Christ had “compassion” and healed the sick. But didn't Christ have compassion on the sick when he was twenty-one? Didn't he see people suffer terribly right before his eyes when he was twenty-five? Did he just stand there and watch these people suffer horrible diseases like leprosy and cancer when he had the power to cure them?

We read in the Bible that Christ performed his first miracle at Cana when he turned the water into wine (John 2:1–11). After studying carefully the first couple chapters in Luke and John, we can deduce that Christ's first miracle occurred shortly *after* he started his ministry at approximately thirty years of age.⁵ So why did Christ wait until he was about thirty to miraculously heal people and display to the world his miracle-working powers? *Because Christ healed with a purpose.* And that purpose was achieved in a predetermined period two thousand years ago. This is just further evidence that God (in this case, God the Son) works differently in different periods of time, as evidenced all the way through the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.

And here is just another example of God's wise parenting strategies.

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Miracles had a specific purpose for the church; but as adults today we don't need signs and wonders to authenticate the words of God's ambassadors; we already have God's Word written down for us in black and white. Nor do we need spectacular healings to prove to the unsaved that God exists. Remember what Abraham said when the rich man in Hades begged the patriarch to send Lazarus back from the grave to warn his brothers: "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead'" (Luke 16:31). If the unsaved will not believe what the written Word of God says and apply it in their lives, no miracle will ever convince them. The unbeliever may stick around in the church to see more spectacular "healings," but a genuine miracle by itself will *never* bring anyone to completely surrender his or her life to God.

Many of you have probably heard the story of Ryan Corbin, Pat Boone's grandson. One day in June 2001, while sun tanning on the roof of an apartment Ryan somehow fell through a skylight, falling forty feet to the floor below. He suffered a severe head injury, and in the beginning the doctors didn't think he would live. But he did, although he was left severely disabled, in a wheelchair and unable to walk on his own.

After the accident the family was interviewed four times on *Larry King Live*. In an April 2003 interview for Billy Graham's *Decision* magazine, Pat Boone said this:

Larry King himself acknowledges that he's an agnostic.

... Larry views it, I think, as a test case. He's looking to see what God does in Ryan's case. Perhaps he is thinking, "Is God going to hear your prayer? What is your faith based on? Why do you think prayer makes a difference?"

... Ryan, I'm confident, is going to walk into Larry King's studio one day and share what God has done. I pray that God will allow me to be there with Ryan and say, "Larry, has God shown you what you needed to see? Do you doubt that God has done this for Ryan?" I would like to hear him saying, "No, I don't doubt it. There is no other explanation. It is miraculous."⁶

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Pat Boone, like so many others, believes that agnostics like Larry King will automatically believe in God and put their faith in him if they can only see a miracle: “Larry, has God shown you what you needed to see?” But, folks, this isn’t the issue in an unrepentant heart. Even the demons *know* with 100 percent certainty that a personal and powerful God exists. They have seen firsthand the miracles of God. And they tremble (James 2:19)! But they will never submit their lives to God in worship and complete surrender. Why? Because the limiting factor in conversion is not belief that God exists, but rather submission to the lordship of Christ. And no number of miracles can accomplish this feat without humble submissiveness in a person’s life, made possible only by the inward drawing of the Holy Spirit (John 6:44; Eph. 2:1–10).

The influential German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “If you could prove God to me, I would believe Him all the less.”⁷ It wouldn’t matter if Ryan died, was buried, and rose to life a week later—no miracle is ever going to change Larry King until he is ready to submit his life to God. Larry King has interviewed numerous Christians with amazing inspirational stories of God’s powerful working—yet he remains an agnostic. Genuine conversion takes place primarily in the heart—not in the brain, and not in the eyes.


Even in the New Testament, miracles were never intended to bring masses of people to a saving faith. Though numerous miracles authenticated the ministry of Christ and his apostles, and established a recognizable launch of a new divine parenting strategy era, the mind-boggling miracles did not produce widespread faith (see Luke 10:13–15). The masses still crucified Christ and murdered his disciples.

Using Scripture as our model, we arrive then at the definition I gave earlier of signs and wonders—genuine miracles of healing.

A miracle is an extraordinary event wrought by God through human agency, an event that cannot be explained by natural forces.⁸

With this definition in hand, let’s carefully compare what is taking place in modern faith-healing circles to what Christ and the apostles did two thousand years ago.

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