

Remember the old adage? “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” It’s true of everything, isn’t it? But it’s especially true of miracles. Miracles are happening all around us all the time, but you won’t see them if you don’t know how to look for them.

Let me explain what I mean. Harvard sociologists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simon conducted an experiment in which they asked test subjects to watch a ten second video of a basketball game. In the middle of the video, a woman wearing a gorilla suit walks into the frame, beats her chest, and walks out. Viewers are given specific instructions: count the number of passes made by players wearing white t-shirts. Of course, the researchers were not interested in their pass-counting ability. They wanted to see if the viewers would notice something they weren’t looking for, something as obvious as a gorilla. Amazingly, half of the test group said they never saw the gorilla!

How is that even possible? How do you miss the gorilla in the room? It’s called “inattention blindness.” Inattention blindness is the failure to notice something in your field of vision because you are focused on something else, in this case people wearing white t-shirts passing basketballs. But the Pharisees make an even better case study. They were so focused on Sabbath law that they couldn’t see the miracles happening right in front of their eyes. Jesus healed an invalid who hadn’t walked in thirty-eight years, gave sight to a man born blind, and restored a man’s withered arm. But the Pharisees missed the miracle, and missed the Messiah, because they were blinded by their legalism. They couldn’t see past their religious assumptions.

Thomas Jefferson suffered from inattention blindness, too. Jefferson had a profound appreciation for the teaching of Jesus, but Jefferson was also a child of the Enlightenment. As a sixteen year-old first-year student at the College of William and Mary, Jefferson read the writings of the British empiricists John Locke, Sir Francis Bacon, and their enlightened friends who enthroned reason and made logic their lord. Jefferson did likewise.

In February 1804, Jefferson went to work with a razor. He clipped his favorite passages out of his Bible and pasted them on paper in double columns. Jefferson included the teachings of Jesus, but he excluded the miracles. He deleted the virgin birth, the resurrection, and every supernatural event in between. In the words of historian Edwin Gaustad, “If a moral lesson was embedded in a miracle, the lesson survived in Jeffersonian scripture, but the miracle did not. Even when this took careful cutting with scissors.” The story of the man with the withered hand is a classic example. In Jefferson’s Bible, Jesus still offers

commentary on the Sabbath, but the man’s hand is left unhealed. When Jefferson got to John’s Gospel, Gaustad notes, “he kept his blade busy.” Jefferson’s version of the Gospels ends with the stone rolled in front of the tomb. Jesus died on the cross but never rose from the dead.

Hard to imagine, isn’t it – taking scissors to sacred Scripture? But don’t we do the very same thing? We wouldn’t dare use a razor, but we cut and paste nonetheless. We pick and choose our favorite verses while ignoring the texts we cannot comprehend or don’t particularly like. We rationalize the verses that are too radical. We scrub down the verses that are too supernatural. We put Scripture on the chopping block of human logic and end up with a neutered gospel. We commit intellectual idolatry, creating God in our image. So instead of living a life that resembles the supernatural standard set in Scripture, we follow an abridged version of the Bible that looks an awful lot like us.

When you subtract the miracles like Thomas Jefferson did, you’re left with a very weak yet wise Jesus. I’m afraid this is the Jesus many people follow. He’s kind and compassionate, but the raw power is missing in action. So we follow his teachings but never experience his miracles. And that doesn’t just fall short of the standard he set – it misses the point altogether.

One of the boldest statements in the Bible is found in John 14:14: *whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.* Greater things! It would sound like heresy if it didn’t come from the lips of Jesus. It’s one of those verses that we tend to rationalize, so let me tell you exactly what it means. If you follow Jesus, you’ll do what he did. You’ll seek to please God first and foremost. You’ll care for the poor, you’ll wash feet, and you’ll offend some Pharisees along the way. You’ll also traffic in the miraculous. And it won’t just be as an eyewitness. It’ll be as a catalyst. In other words, you will be someone else’s miracle!

Make no mistake about it: only God can perform miracles. So God gets all the glory. But as we study the miracles in John’s Gospel, you’ll see that nearly every miracle has a human element. Sometimes you need to step into the sea before God will part the waters. Sometimes you’ve got to do the natural before God will do the supernatural.

Planet Earth was designed with natural boundaries that mark the outer limits of human possibility. The speed of light is the fence line, and the laws of nature are the fence posts.

While those fence posts are constantly being repositioned by scientific research, they establish a borderline between what is possible and what is impossible. It's the invisible, impassable fence between the natural and the supernatural, and no human can dig under it, climb over it, or walk around it. But God has put a gate in the fence. His name is Jesus.

The seven miracles recorded in John's Gospel are seven signs, and each sign points straight to Jesus. In John's Gospel, Jesus turns water into wine, heals a child long distance, heals a man paralyzed for thirty-eight years, feeds five thousand people, walks on water, heals a man born blind, and raises a man from the dead. Sometimes God shows up. Sometimes God shows off. That's what Jesus did in these miracles: he showed us he was God among us, and he showed what the power of faith and belief can accomplish.

Maybe you're praying for a miracle right now! Everyone needs a miracle some time. But let me offer a word of caution as we begin our study on miracles: Don't seek miracles. Just follow Jesus. If you follow Jesus long enough and far enough, you'll eventually find yourself in the middle of some miracles. But along the way, don't miss the miracles happening around you and inside of you every day.

And I don't want you to miss the single greatest miracle of all: the forgiveness of sin made possible through the crucifixion and resurrection of the sinless Son of God. There is no close second. That miracle is available to anyone, anytime. And it's the only miracle we must experience if we want to spend eternity with God. But the miracle of salvation isn't the finish line. It's the baseline.

As Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, when a person's mind is stretched by a new idea, it never returns to its original dimensions. Our exploration of the seven miracles in John's Gospel will stretch your mind, but I pray it will also stretch your faith. That was John's original intent. These miracles don't just reveal what Jesus did, past tense. They reveal what Jesus wants to do in your life, present tense. What he's done before, he wants to do again. God can make your impossible possible!

Heavily excerpted from Mark Batterson's *The Grave Robber*, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2014.

## Don't Miss the Miracle

Sunday, January 31, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

**Psalm 77:11-15 and John 3:2; 20:30-31**

On a cold January morning in 2007, a world-class violinist played six of Johann Sebastian Bach's most stirring concertos for the solo violin on a three-hundred-year-old Stradivarius worth \$3.5 million. Just two nights before, Joshua Bell played at a sold-out concert where patrons gladly paid \$200 for nosebleed seats; but this time the performance was free.

Bell ditched his tux and tails, donned a Washington Nationals baseball cap, and played incognito outside the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station. Street musicians are a common sight and sound for Washingtonians; with their music cases open for tips, the musicians play their hearts out as the crowded masses shuffle by.

On an average weekday nearly a million passengers ride Washington's Metro system: a stampede of tourists and government employees hustle and bustle through turnstiles, trying to get where they're going as quickly as possible. Of the 1,097 people who passed by Joshua Bell that morning, only seven stopped to listen. The forty-five minute performance ended without applause or acknowledgement. For his efforts, Bell netted \$32.17 in tips, which included a \$20 tip from one person who recognized the Grammy Award Winning artist.

This little social experiment was originally conceived by *Washington Post* columnist Gene Weingarten and filmed by hidden camera. It raised the question: If we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the greatest musicians in the world, playing some of the finest music ever written, on one of the most beautiful instruments ever made, how many similarly sublime moments do we miss out on during a normal day?