

Some Effort Required

It struck me that there is a common theme in some of the greatest miracles of the Bible.

When God promised to save Noah, He first said, “build an ark.”

When God conquered the city of Jericho for Joshua, He first said, “march around the city seven times.”

When God helped Gideon deliver Israel from the Midianites, He first said, “pull down the altar of Baal” (Judges 6:25).

When God provided water for an army and its livestock, He first said, “fill this valley with trenches” to collect the water (2 Kings 3:16).

When God healed Hezekiah’s fatal illness, He first said, “take a cake of figs” (2 Kings 20:7).

When God provides our daily bread, He first requires us to get up and go to work and punch a clock.

If we restrict ourselves to the miracles of Jesus, we find the same principle. When Jesus provided the wine for a wedding, He first told the servants, “fill the waterpots with water” (John 2:7).

When Jesus gave a man sight, He first said, “go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (John 9:7).

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He first said to the mourners, “remove the stone” (John 11:39).

When Jesus healed ten lepers, He first said, “go and show yourselves to the priests” and they were healed on the way (Luke 17:14).

When Jesus blessed the fishermen’s catch, He first said, “put out into the deep water and let down your nets” (Luke 5:4). While they were first reluctant, they obeyed, and enclosed a great quantity of fish.

When Jesus helped Peter pay a tax, He first said, “go to the sea, and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. Take that, and give it to them” (Matthew 17:27).

The point, it seems to me, is very clear. Much of the time, human effort is demanded for God to provide His blessings. Jesus could have healed and provided instantly, and without human

cooperation. He

could have snapped His fingers and the wine would have appeared, pots and all. He could have spoken the word, and the blind man would have had sight and the lepers would have been healed, on the spot. He could have told Peter to look in his pocket and a coin would have been there.

Now, God doesn't need our efforts. Sometimes, the point of a miracle is to show the futility of human effort. For example, when Jesus saw the lame man who, for thirty-eight years, had been hauled daily to the pool of Bethesda to be made able, Jesus simply said, "arise, take up your pallet, and walk" (John 5:8). A woman who had tried everything for twelve years to cure her hemorrhage simply touched Jesus' cloak and was instantly healed (Mark 5:27).

But most of the time, God wants to see our faith reflected in action. God requires belief, and our actions demonstrate our belief. When God healed Naaman of his leprosy, He first said, "go wash in the Jordan seven times" (2 Kings 5:10). Naaman was so angry at this nonsensical requirement that he at first refused. So long as he waited, he remained a leper. At the sixth washing, he remained a leper. But when he obeyed and came out of the water the seventh time, his skin was restored.

When God provided valuable oil to give a widow money to live on, He first said, "borrow vessels at large for yourselves from all your neighbors, empty vessels; do not get a few" (2 Kings 4:3). And every vessel she brought was filled. He she gotten more, likely they would have been filled, too. The richness of the blessing was in proportion to her effort of faith.

This doesn't mean human effort has earned God's grace (thereby changing it from a gift to a wage), or that human effort has caused the desired outcome. It simply shows our belief.

The same could be said of salvation. While salvation is a free gift, human effort is expected. When God offers to save us, He first asks us to believe in His Son Jesus Christ, to confess this belief publicly, to turn from our sins, and to be baptized in water into His name for the forgiveness of our sins. Sure, this includes human effort. But this is the same as every offer God has ever made to mankind. Because I've obeyed doesn't mean I've saved myself. It only means I've believed in God's gracious word! —John Guzzetta

Once The Trash is On Board

On August 31, 1986, the captain and owners of the cargo barge *Khian Sea* made a mistake. The ship picked up 14,000 tons of toxic ashes from Philadelphia, to be transported and dumped in New Jersey. But, in the meantime, New Jersey stopped receiving any more waste.

Thus, the captain began a years-long saga to offload the ash. First he island-hopped the Caribbean. He was turned away by the Bahamas, Dominica, Honduras, Panama, Bermuda, and the Dutch Antilles.

He showed up in Philadelphia and attempted to return the load, but they refused it. He went to Africa and tried to dump the load in Senegal and Morocco. He went to Europe and tried to dump it in Yugoslavia. He went to Asia and tried Sri Lanka and Singapore. All refused it.

He changed the ship's name and registry, first to *Felicia* and then to *Pelicano*, but the changes failed to disguise the ship's history and cargo. All told, the ship was rejected at over 400 ports on four continents!

The captain never found anyone to accept his ship. Eventually, over two years later, in November 1988, the load simply disappeared. The captain and company owners stood trial, and admitted that they finally just dumped the toxic waste into the Indian Ocean.

What's the lesson? Once we let the trash on board, it can be difficult to unload it. We carry it everywhere, and it prevents us from finding rest. Just as a bell cannot be unringed, and terrible sights cannot be unseen, some sins cling stubbornly to the conscience. "The eye is the lamp of the body ... if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matt. 6:22). Paul encouraged us to "dwell on" the things of honor, righteousness, and excellence (Phil. 4:8–9).

The things we watch and hear today, are the things we imitate and do tomorrow. Guard the heart and mind from trash that is difficult to get rid of later. A toxic mind will stunt our growth, blight our influence, poison our relationships, keep us wandering and homeless in a storm-tossed sea, and prevent us from doing any further work until the load is resolved. —John Guzzetta