

OCTOBER 22, 2022

Miracles, Prayer, and the Bible.

First, Miracles.

Many people have the vague impression that the Old Testament is packed with miracles. In fact, it is not. Leaving aside the first part of Genesis and the great miracles that are Creation and humanity, the Old Testament deals with about 1500 years of Israel's history. In the course of those 1500 years, miracles are concentrated around three people. These are the Prophet and Lawgiver Moses, around 1200 B.C., and the Prophets Elijah and Elisha, around 700 B.C. From this observation, I think we may draw three conclusions about miracles from the Old Testament. The first is that God does in fact work miracles. The second is that He usually chooses to work His miracles through rare, chosen vessels of His Grace. The third is that miracles are not His normal way of working in the world He has created, and with the people He has chosen.

One of the miracles associated with the Prophet and Lawgiver Moses is the miracle recounted in this Sunday's First Reading, a Lesson from chapter 17 of the Book of Exodus. In this story, the people of Israel, in the process of becoming a nation, fight the warrior tribesmen of Amalek, standing between them and the Promised Land and saying, in effect, "you'll have to go through us" As long as Moses prays with outstretched hands, Israel prevails. This story is read at Sunday Mass once every three years, picked to go with the Gospel reading about the Lord Jesus Christ's teaching in Luke 18: 1-8, regarding perseverance in prayer. If we pray, God will assist us.

How will God assist us? With a miracle?

Perhaps, but most likely not. He will assist us by giving us the courage, confidence and calm to use our abilities and equipment well. Depending on the situation at hand, we will need certain abilities, developed through training and practice. Depending on the situation at hand, we will need certain equipment. We cannot expect that after we pray God will miraculously infuse into us abilities we have not acquired through training and practice. We cannot expect that after we pray the equipment we need will miraculously materialize. We can expect that after we pray we will have, with God's help, courage, confidence, and calm. With courage, confidence, and calm, we can use our abilities and equipment well.

Here is one example of what I mean.

Decades ago I knew a World War II fighter pilot. He told me a story from his teens, in the Washington D.C. of the 1930s. His parents belonged to a certain heretical Christian sect that taught its adherents not to go to hospitals or physicians, but to learn to pray well to bring about physical healings. The boy's best friend's father was a physician, but his parents never went to him with their son's youthful ailments. This worked well enough, until the day the kid broke his leg in a bicycle crash. As his parents tried to deal with the broken leg through prayer, the boy

shouted to his best friend, who was wealthy enough to have a cheap car. His friend took him to his dad, the doctor, and professional medicine took over. His leg eventually healed completely. The boy soon left his parents' sect. During World War II, he became a Catholic.

Now, wait a minute! Don't Catholics pray for the sick and injured?

Indeed we do. We pray for them, and take them to the hospital. We pray for them, and seek professional medical care. We pray for them, knowing that God will help the sick and injured. He may, on those rare occasions when, in His infinite wisdom He judges it helpful for the salvation of souls, give a visible, tangible miracle. Always, if they are well disposed, God will help the sick have the courage, confidence, and calm that are so essential to recovery from illness and injury. Always, if they are well disposed, God will help physicians, nurses, health care workers and caregivers have the courage, confidence, and calm that are so essential to using their knowledge, skills, and equipment well. When there is healing, who accomplished it? God? The patient? Doctors and nurses? All of them accomplished it, God working through the patient and the medical personnel, and the patient and medical personnel cooperating with God.

On 7 October, 1571, a Hispano-Italian naval and marine force destroyed the Ottoman Turkish navy at the Battle of Lepanto, ending, not for just that day, but for countless days to come, the threat of Istanbul's Padishah-Sultan adding Italy to the long list of lands under his tyrannical rule. Pope St. Pius V attributed the victory to the Catholic people devoutly praying the Rosary. Writing on that battle, the modern American writer Victor Davis Hanson attributed it to the mostly Italian galleys being designed to have much more cannon than the Turkish galleys, and to the expert musketry of the mostly Spanish Marines (one of whom, Miguel de Cervantes, went on to write the great "Don Quixote"). What won the battle? Praying the Rosary? Canons? Marine marksmanship? All of the above. If people had been praying the Rosary, but there had been no cannon and no expert Marines, the battle would have been lost. I dare say also that, had there been no praying of the Rosary, the battle would have been lost even with the cannon and the marines. Napoleon Bonaparte, a man who knew something about war, once claimed that in combat the morale of a force outweighs its material weaponry by a factor of ten. He was likely exaggerating for effect, but his point is clear. You can have all the equipment you need, and even training in how to use it, but without courage, calm, and confidence, you are doomed. In response to those praying for the triumph of justice in dire adversity and danger, God will give to the well disposed the courage, calm, and confidence they need to use their training and equipment well, and to win for a just cause.

One medical example, and one military example.

Examples could, and should, be given in many other fields, but these will suffice to make the point. Pray, as the Lord encourages, with perseverance. Pray with the expectation that He will help. Do not expect Him to help with a visible miracle. Do expect Him to help by giving you and those for whom you pray, if they are well disposed, the courage, calm, and confidence they need to use well the knowledge, skill, training, and equipment they have.

So, whatever is going on, for needs both temporal and spiritual, pray, and pray with perseverance.

Now, to pray, and especially to pray with perseverance, it is necessary to have Faith. Faith is God's gift, given by God to those who are willing to listen to what He has to say. Where do we find God's words?

The Bible.

In today's second reading, from St Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy, St. Paul tells St. Timothy "All Scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work"

All Scripture is inspired by God.

"Inspired" by God.

Just this past week I learned that the word St. Paul uses here is used only this one time in the entire New Testament. The Greek word is "Theopneustos", literally "God-breathed", from the noun "Theos - God" and the verb "Pneo - breath out".

Everything written in the Bible has been breathed out by God. God is the ultimate source of all the Sacred Scriptures. These sacred texts have human authors, but their ultimate author is God Himself, who breathed His message into all the many human beings who were involved down through the centuries in the producing the Biblical texts.

Listen to the Bible, as passages are read in the Church's Liturgy. Read the Bible yourself, seeking guidance from the Church about difficult passages.

Of course, there is much profit in other kinds of spiritual reading, much of it by great saints.

No other spiritual reading, however, is "God-breathed". Make sure that the Bible, at the very least the passages proclaimed at Mass, is part of your prayer life. By listening sincerely to the words of Scripture, you will be given the gift of Faith.

No other writings, however beautiful or authoritative (two quite distinct things!) compare to the Bible. Only the Bible is God-breathed.

I remember some people from outside the Diocese giving us some kind of exhortation to adult faith formation in our parishes. It was a good exhortation, except when they said "people can form study groups for the Bible, magisterial documents, etc."

Whoa! I thought.

Don't jumble them together that way.

The Bible is inspired by God. Since last week I have learned to call it "God-breathed" It is unique and privileged. Even "magisterial documents", which means official papal and episcopal statements, are not God-breathed. God does not directly inspire the writings of popes and bishops, although He does promise that He will not allow them to fall into actual error, when they make definitive statements to the entire Church and to all the world about Faith and Morals.

The Sacred Scriptures are God-breathed. They are directly inspired. They are diverse, and some are easier to understand than others. All of them are to be heard and read in union with the Church, and not apart from the Church. When we do hear and read them, however, God is

speaking to us. If we are willing to listen, we will receive Faith. It is good to read other spiritual and religious texts, certainly including magisterial documents, but the Bible is first and foremost in the reading and listening of the Christian people.

The Bible is, if you will, a portable shrine for the very words of God Himself.

It was, you may not know, possible to make St. Francis of Assisi mad. It wasn't easy, but it could be done. Irreverence towards the Most Blessed and Holy Eucharist, in which the Lord Jesus is present Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, infuriated him. Irreverence toward the Holy Bible, in which the Lord is present spiritually, and in the words that He Himself has breathed, severely annoyed him.

Treat your Bible well, but do not let it collect dust. It is God's message to you, as truthful as God Himself, for He has breathed it. It will show you how to live as a Christian, and teach you all the essentials of becoming a saint.

"All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work"