

He Still Heals

When Thérèse was 2 years old, she cried to her mother that a snake had bitten her. By the time Antoinette Malombé reached her daughter, little Thérèse had already stopped breathing.

Antoinette lived in a remote region of Republic of Congo in central Africa where medical resources weren't immediately available. Strapping her child to her back, she started running to a village where a family friend, evangelist Coco Moïse, was staying. When he prayed for Thérèse, she began breathing again. By the next day she was fine.

This account was reported to me directly by Antoinette. When I spoke more with her about it, I asked how long Thérèse had gone without breathing. She paused and thought about the distance she had to traverse to reach the evangelist's village and said it took her about three hours.

The human brain suffers irreparable damage after only six minutes without oxygen, even if the person can be artificially revived. Thérèse had gone close to 180 minutes without taking a breath. Yet she suffered no brain damage—as she herself can attest to today, many years later. Thérèse recently completed seminary.

I am married to her younger sister, Médine Moussounga Keener, and Antoinette is my mother-in-law. Though not meaning to question my relatives' account of Thérèse's healing, I nonetheless checked with Moïse, just to be sure, and he confirmed the story as I had heard it.

A miracle? Certainly. A supernatural event isolated to rural Africa? Hardly.

In a 2006 survey of 10 nations, a whopping 200 million Pentecostals and charismatics claimed to have witnessed or experienced divine healing. Perhaps equally as noteworthy in

the 231-page Pew Forum report, titled “Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals,” was that close to 39 percent of other Christians in these countries, who did not identify themselves as Pentecostal or charismatic affiliates, also made the same claim.

Moreover, in China, where the survey wasn’t conducted, it is estimated that healings in Jesus’ name have led to roughly half of the millions of conversions there in recent decades. That estimate comes from China Christian Council, which is affiliated with the Protestant, state-approved Three Self Patriotic Movement. A source with the underground church in China offers a far higher estimate: 90 percent.

Whatever the precise percentage is, worldwide we are talking about hundreds of millions of people who claim to be eyewitnesses of healing miracles.

Yet skeptical scholars often rule out miracles on the basis of an argument by the 18th century philosopher David Hume. At the risk of oversimplifying, Hume’s rationale (which is circular) runs like this: We cannot trust reports of miracles because no one trustworthy reports them.

Hume accepted his own circle (in which no one claimed to have witnessed miracles) as the standard. Had he lived today, with such reports as Pew Forum’s available to him, even Hume might have been forced to reconsider his stance. By comparison, his circular argument, which is nothing more than an assumption, seems impossibly weak today.

Surprised by Miracles

I’ve personally experienced healing, and I witnessed healings after being filled with the Holy Spirit two days after my conversion from atheism in 1975. Yet little in my experience prepared me for the eyewitness accounts of raisings from the dead that I learned of as I collected research for what has turned into a book.

I didn't set out to write on miracles. I was writing on the historical reliability of the Gospels and simply planned to counter scholarly skepticism about miracles by citing a few modern examples in a footnote. The note, however, grew into a chapter, and after 100 pages I realized I was on to something bigger. It now looks like the book (currently being edited for publication) may be 1,000 pages. Despite including hundreds of accounts of healings, I've barely scratched the surface of reports that are available.

These include multiple accounts of the mother of all healings: being raised from the dead. The skepticism that dismisses miraculous cures as merely psychosomatic fails hopelessly in the case of anyone coming back to life. Yet I've come across more than 150 such accounts from 50-plus sources in the course of researching.

Given my limited sample size, this number is at most a small fraction of such accounts today. I lack the means to verify some of the reports, but a number of others come from people I know personally or have other reason to trust.

There is the raising of a man pronounced dead in a hospital in Sri Lanka, deceased for roughly 24 hours. Because of communication problems his friends were unaware he had died and kept praying for him. His raising is attested by a friend of mine and known by eyewitnesses there.

A woman I know in the Philippines died from liver cancer. At the morgue, a Baptist pastor—a woman who wasn't even sure if she believed in divine healing—for some reason prayed over the corpse, and my friend returned to life. Her liver cancer instantly disappeared.

A Nigerian friend of mine shared several miraculous accounts with me. In one, he prayed over a boy's body for a few hours until he returned to life.

When visiting with my wife in her country, the Congo, I

interviewed various laypersons in her circle. These were people known for praying, and all are members of the traditional Protestant denomination there. In the process, I heard seven eyewitness reports of raisings.

“Mama” Jeanne Mabilia shared several cases with me. In one of these, a family brought the corpse of a young woman who had just died after a lengthy illness and laid it on the mat Mama Jeanne used for prayer. She ordered the family out so she and her friends could pray.

The family kept looking in the window to see what would happen. As Mama Jeanne began to call the woman’s name, Marie, she returned to life.

In another, a grandfather was already building the coffin for his granddaughter, who was born dead with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, when Mama Jeanne prayed over the infant. The child returned to life and is in school today.

“Papa” Albert Bissouessoue said he shared his faith while working as a school inspector in another part of the country. Some eight hours after a 5-year-old girl had died, family members brought the corpse to Papa Bissouessoue.

Traditional healers had accomplished nothing for the child. Papa Bissouessoue urged her family to turn from other gods to the true God, then prayed for the girl for half an hour until she returned to life. Not surprisingly, a number of people became followers of Jesus after this event.

Why Not in America?

Last year I presented a paper at a secular scholars conference, noting that the eyewitness reports of miracles in many parts of the world today are similar to those recorded in the Bible. My guess is that some of my fellow scholars, unfamiliar with such claims, didn’t know what to make of them.

Yet even in that environment a Nigerian scholar, Ayodeji Adewuya, stood and shared two accounts he witnessed. The first was a miracle over nature; the second, the raising of his baby son 20 minutes after he had been pronounced dead in 1981—a son who recently received a master's degree in London.

Obviously, not all miracles occurring today are overseas. I've researched many accounts of the miraculous here in the United States. But I have also found that some types of miracles seem more common elsewhere.

This begs the question: Why do reports of the miraculous seem to occur more frequently in other parts of the world than the U.S.?

I believe we should consider several reasons, as long as we keep in mind that miracles are signs of the kingdom—that is, they are foretastes of the world to come but not the fullness of the future world itself. All healing is partial and temporary; all of us will die if the Lord tarries. Given that, miracles whet our appetite for what the full life of the kingdom will be like.

First, in some places the need is incomparably greater than it is here. Just as God can provide food for us through natural resources, He can also provide healing for us through medical means.

In much of the world, though, our brothers and sisters in Christ have nothing to depend on except for God to heal them directly. Even in Africa, of course, most people who die remain dead. But God is compassionate toward His desperate children.

Second, we can expect to see signs especially on the cutting edge of evangelism. In the Bible, gifts of healings are for the church and need not be dramatic to accomplish their purpose. By contrast, signs and wonders are meant to draw unbelievers' attention to the gospel; hence they tend to be

more dramatic.

When Heidi Baker—who with her husband, Rolland, directs the interdenominational mission Iris Ministries in Africa—prays for the deaf in Muslim villages in Mozambique, they almost always are healed. Why? The honor of Jesus' name is at stake, and God wants these Muslims to know how much Jesus loves them.

Several years ago, an Indian doctoral student at my seminary explained that his Baptist church in India had grown from a handful of members to about 600 through prayers for healing. He noted that even if *I* prayed for the sick in India, they would get healed; yet he was dismayed because no one he prayed for in the United States got healed. God was eager for the precious Hindus this man prayed for to know how much He loved them.

This isn't to say that signs cannot happen in the context of evangelism here, even among ordinary Christians.

Years ago I was working at an apartment complex during summer vacation from college when an older woman confided to me that doctors had not been able to help her with her knee. So I knelt and prayed for her.

A few days later she returned and said her knee had been better since I prayed for it and that she wanted me to pray for her lungs. A chain smoker, she was coughing up blood. Her doctor thought she had lung cancer. After admonishing her not to smoke, I agreed to pray for her lungs.

"But whether God heals you, you need to be ready to meet Him someday," I warned.

God did heal her lungs that day, but more importantly, she accepted Christ. Her healing that day was just a foretaste of God's greater promises for her.

The third reason that healing is less common here is one we

can do something about. Hume's reasoning has not only influenced scholars to doubt but also permeated our culture with disbelief. True, not every claim about a miracle is genuine; there is a place for cautious investigation.

Yet unconsciously mixing our faith with the values of the world, many of us accept a God who acts privately in our hearts but harbor doubts that He will act openly on people's bodies. Or to use biblical language, we have compromised with "holding to a form of godliness, although [we] have denied its power" (2 Tim. 3:5, NASB).

Often we also think of faith as a mental state void of doubt that we can work ourselves into. Yet real faith is a confidence in the loving God we know because we have an intimate relationship with Him.

Our reaction when we hear of a miracle ought to be the affirmation that God *does* do works like this today. Perhaps the more we learn to respond to these gifts in faith, the more apt we will be to experience them ourselves.