

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! In this edition I'll be looking at a special kind of problem solving.

I'm extending an invitation for submissions to be published in The Gospel Notes Newsletter. The primary criteria for inclusion are these:

1. It should be oriented towards the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. It should use the scriptures as a source of information.
3. It should include the references for any quoted 3rd party sources.
4. It should not be political.

In addition, if you have a testimony to share, please send that to me as well and let me know if you would like it to be included in a future edition of the newsletter. Please keep in mind the four criteria listed above where applicable.

Also, if you have particular subjects that you would like me to cover in the Newsletter, please let me know.

You can also view previous editions of The Gospel Notes Newsletter (TGNN) in PDF (Portable Document Format) by going to:

<https://thechurchofjesuschrist.info/TheGospelNotesNewsletter>

If at any time you do not wish to receive this newsletter, please let me know. Your responses to me are confidential unless you request otherwise.

2 Kings 5:10, 14

10 And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times; and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.

14 Then went he down and dipped himself seven times in Jordan according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

John 21:6 And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast, therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.

Ether 1:66-69

66 And I know, O Lord, that thou hast all power and can do whatsoever thou wilt for the benefit of man; therefore, touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea.

67 Behold, O Lord, thou canst do this. We know that thou art able to show forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men.

68 And it came to pass that when the Brother of Jared had said these words, behold, the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones, one by one, with his finger;

69 And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the Brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood; and the Brother of Jared fell down before the Lord, for he was struck with fear.

These passages all share something in common: they show a unique perspective on solving a problem that was otherwise intractable – they could not be solved by standard methods. In each of these a solution was presented that could only be described as miraculous. They fall outside the logic of any normal circumstance.

When Naaman the captain of the Syrian armies had developed leprosy, he no doubt had the profound realization that his life was essentially over. He would die with leprosy and it would be a long, arduous and painful end to his very successful life as a general. Leprosy in those days was entirely incurable.

Likewise, the disciples out fishing had caught nothing after an entire night of doing the same thing over and over again, but upon following the advice of Jesus they had such an abundance that they could hardly handle it. Logic tells you that the boat was small and that it didn't matter which side you cast the net from – so the logic of this was ironclad: they had worked all night long and had nothing to show for it, so casting the net on the other side shouldn't have made any difference at all.

Similarly, the Brother of Jared had been instructed by the Lord to build barges similar to those they had built before, except that these barges had to be capable of being fully sealed. There would be times when they would be fully submerged, unlike their previous sailing journeys. If they used fire for light they would all die from suffocation. They did not have flashlights or glow sticks like we do today, so the problem was a very technical one. They still had to move around and see, but this was going to be a long journey. They couldn't very well expect to be in darkness for the space of almost a year. They needed a solution.

Each of these scenarios involved some very common kinds of problems, but they required something above common to solve. It required divine aid.

The nature of the miraculous is that it is inexplicable – there were no known physical solutions to these problems using the tools that were available to them. Yet solutions were found, and those solutions did not involve the processes that would be familiar to them.

The scriptures give us a record, time after time, in which the miraculous is the **only** solution. But what is a miracle?

These are three examples of miracles – only three out of the hundreds or thousands that we find in the scriptures. These three, however, share something in common that we might do well to understand and appreciate. They share in common both the divine intervention of God, and what today we might call out-of-the-box thinking.

If Naaman had, as he originally resolved to do, not dipped in the Jordan river seven times he would not have been healed, and if the disciples had not taken Jesus' advice they would have returned to the shore as defeated men, and if the Brother of Jared had not asked the Lord to touch the stones with his finger they would have suffered considerably in their ocean journey.

These were uncommon solutions, but they required faith and a willingness to do something different than established wisdom might otherwise dictate. In each of these it was not the physical

actions that occurred that caused the miraculous to happen – no, it was the action of faith that resulted in the solution that worked.

I work in the field of computer systems engineering, in which we deal with computers that fulfill various roles. These computers have processors, memory, storage, and connectivity with other computers, and they use software programs to guide them in performing those tasks that are useful to the people who use them. There isn't anything about these systems that haven't been very carefully and studiously designed and developed by very intelligent people. In theory we should have a perfect understanding of how they behave and how they carry out those tasks. In theory.

Reality is often very different than theory though. Programs may have unexpected interactions with other programs, and the hardware may not always perform as well or as expected as you might think. There are variables that even those most highly developed systems may encounter that leave you wondering, "Why isn't this working?"

Even through careful analysis you can get stumped. I've occasionally found myself in those situations where I look at every parameter, every setting, every configuration, and say to myself, "There is no reason this shouldn't be working." It has happened more times than I'd like to admit.

Part of the troubleshooting process – and usually a very effective one – is to make one change, see how it affects the process, then make another change, and so on until the strange behavior reveals itself. What do you do when that doesn't work? What if all your careful analysis fails to reveal a solution, or even some indication about what might be causing the problem?

I've come across that situation more times than I'd like to admit also. But I have a secret solution up my sleeve that has often brought me to a better understanding of what is causing the problem.

I keep these scriptures in mind and realize that everything we have tried that is logical and sensible has failed, and that something else is required. I've told others this solution for their benefit moving forward, and that solution? "When everything logical has failed, try something illogical." Or, phrased differently, "When you've done everything that makes sense, do something that doesn't make sense."

That is not to say that you do something that you **know** is dangerous or that will cause some damage – no, it is to say, "Live outside the box for a moment and think of something you don't normally think has any impact on the problem." The term "out of the box thinking" is often an overused term in the modern world, and what some consider "out of the box" is not what others do.

People like Naaman, the disciples, the Brother of Jared, or countless others have been given opportunities by God to experience something unique and wonderful when faced by something they could not solve by their own wisdom or logic, or even by their own power. There was nothing particularly special about the Jordan river – it is in fact a muddy river at times, and the sea of Galilee is an inland sea with nothing particularly special about the fish species that live in it or the boats and nets that the fishermen use, nor yet were the stones that the Brother of Jared smelted out of the rocks themselves capable of anything unique. They all required a divine hand.

What draws these three examples together – as do any miraculous events recorded in scripture – is the faith of those involved. And that is part of the point, isn't it? The very "nature" of miracles is that

they involve a solution that can't be attributed to anyone else but God. If we could scientifically determine that dipping in the Jordan seven times has a natural curative effect upon the human body, don't you think that the Jordan would become the medical spa solution that everyone having some disease or ailment would seek after? Scientists would be examining the contents of that river water to discern if it is a chemical or biological mechanism that the seven-times dipping solution provided so that they could reproduce it elsewhere.

Don't you think that if switching the sides of the boat to cast nets out would become standard doctrine for commercial fisherman wherever they ply their trade?

Don't you think there would be a commercial or scientific market for glowing stones if only they could determine how the Lord changed them to emit a safe and continuous form of light?

If these were just physical processes that we could reproduce, they wouldn't be miracles at all – they would be commonplace things that required no faith at all.

But they did require faith, and they are not commonplace things, and we can't reproduce them. Miracles are inherently inhuman solutions to problems. They are the result of the spiritual interference of God in things that matter to us.

You'll notice that in each of these circumstances, faith was present because while they did not know **how** the thing would work, they had reason to "go out on a limb" and try it willingly just in case it could work.

Naaman initially thought Elisha's message was bunk and would have returned to Syria and died from a serious skin disease painfully if he hadn't listened to his servant and said, "Why not?"

I've been in situations where a solution was available that no one else thought was possible. They refused it on the grounds that it was not something they knew could possibly be a solution even though I knew better. This was a pride of knowledge that they faced – they knew better, so there could be nothing short of a solution that they understood that could work. It is simple stubbornness.

Consider this: if I told you that your food poisoning could be taken care of immediately by looking at a painting, would you look at the painting or would you die from the food poisoning because the solution was ridiculous? What a silly solution? Your immune system, cardiovascular system, and your digestive system do not depend on the eyes, so how could looking at an object result in any kind of cure?

But that is the very same kind of situation faced by the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness.

Numbers 21

5 And the people spake against God and against Moses: Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread; neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.

6 And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

7 Therefore, the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against thee; pray unto the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.

8 And the Lord said unto Moses, **Make thee a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.**

9 And Moses made a serpent of brass and put it upon a pole; and **it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.**

This is presumably the original inspiration for what is called the Rod of Aesculapius used by the American Medical Association (and numerous European ones) beginning in 1910, which is a medical emblem used in hospitals and doctor's offices. (The Caduceus, which features 2 snakes on a pole with wings, is based on Roman mythology).

See this article for the full explanation:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4439707/#:~:text=Caduceus%20is%20a%20symbol%20with,side%20image%20is%20the%20caduceus>

In other words, looking at a brass serpent on a pole would bring instant relief those who suffered from the poisonous bites of these fiery serpents. But there were those who refused:

Alma 16:193-194

193 But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look; therefore, they perished.

194 Now the reason they would not look was because they did not believe that it would heal them.

Was there some form of radiation produced by this figure that Moses fashioned for them? Was it the shape that did something?

No, it was the simple act of looking in the hopes that it would work, and it was a promise for those people at that time who were so troubled. And it did work for those who looked. What became of this pole and serpent? We don't know, but it is apparent that, like Naaman, the instruction was the cure, not the object of the command. It was the act of faith that healed and not the medium of the transaction.

The answers we sometimes seek are not what we expect, and that is a common theme in the history of God's dealings with his people.

Isaiah 55:8-9

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

It is the act of a good teacher to present students with problems that need a solution, and to be able to show them a solution that teaches them something important. God is an excellent teacher, and sometimes a difficult one to accept. These situations all were somewhat contrived circumstances because they were object lessons for those participating in them.

Could God have healed Naaman on the spot simply for asking? Could God have provided an abundance of fish during the entire evening of fishing? Could God have just made the wood glow

inside the barges? Absolutely, but he didn't because faith that requires no participation is no faith at all, but he requires us to have faith.

Hebrews 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

"Diligently seek him" is not just a way to finish the sentence – it is the realization that one who is diligent is one who does something, and "seeking" is not just "looking around," but purposefully conducting an investigation.

3 Nephi 6:19-20

19 Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you,

20 For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened.

Answers are there for us. We may not like the answers, but they are there, and God is there to provide them. And as Abraham was told by the angels who visited them,

Genesis 18:13 And the angel of the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord?

And as Jeremiah was told,

Jeremiah 32

26 Then came the word of the Lord unto Jeremiah, saying,

27 Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for me?

Let's not forget who we are dealing with. The God that created all things is offering us an opportunity to get answers to questions, solutions to problems, and a knowledge of things unknown to us if we diligently seek him purposefully and with full intent of heart, doubting nothing, and understanding that there is nothing beyond his ability. That is a special kind of problem solving.