



Minutes With Messiah

Volume 23, Issue 2

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

December 2021

IT'S A MIRACLE

The following story may be apocryphal, but considering the preacher I heard it about, it may be true. A faith healer came to San Diego and drew large crowds. One preacher went to observe. When he saw the types of healing being done, he challenged the healer. He invited him to a certain address, which happened to be one of the cemeteries in town. When the faith healer showed up, he pointed to a recent grave and challenged the man to raise its occupant from the dead. The healer tried his standard response, "I can't do it because there are disbelievers here. I need complete faith." The preacher responded that before Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8) the people laughed at him. Jesus didn't require everyone around to believe. The healer admitted he could not do it (but would not deny his ability to heal sickness), and soon left town.

When we think of miracles, we often think that raising the dead would be the ultimate example. And it probably is. After all, doctors can heal sick people. Vintners turn water to wine every day, just not instantly. While we don't yet have control over the weather, we would only think that moderately cool (or hot, depending on who has control of the thermostat). But raising someone from the dead; that would be amazing. And yet we sit in church and sometimes watch people being raised from the dead and hardly bat an eye. The relatives may take pictures and the congregation clap when it is all done, but many seem to consider the miracle on a par with watching paint dry.

That miracle is baptism. There are, admittedly, many that don't consider the true miracle of baptism because they think of it as a sign that the person has already been raised from the dead. They say you can't see the real miracle, so you have to have someone reenact it later.

Immersion as portrayed in the Bible is a miracle of resurrection. Of course, to raise someone from the dead they have to already be dead. Otherwise it's not really the same thing. So what if you raised someone from the almost dead. No big deal. But we are (or were) truly dead. "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph 2:1) Sin is death. It was ever thus from the

beginning. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen 2:17) Adam and Eve began to die physically when they sinned, but they had already died spiritually.

If we are "not merely dead" but "most sincerely dead", as the Munchkin coroner declares, then it would be a miracle to make us alive. If sin is what makes us dead, then removal of sin makes us alive. And that is what we have in immersion. "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins." (Acts 22:16)

Paul writes about resurrection primarily in two places. In 1 Cor 15 he writes mostly about the physical resurrection. In Romans 6 he writes about the resurrection through immersion.

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

This is indeed a miracle! One who was dead is now alive. They were buried and then resurrected, just as Jesus was. What could be a greater miracle?

It may not be advisable to jump up and whoop and holler when witnessing a baptism, but it might not be improper. When people observed the miracles of Jesus, many of them shouted; some fell on their faces in silent worship. Nobody was unmoved. If we are unmoved when witnessing the miracle of resurrection, maybe we are forgetting what it felt like on the day we experienced it. The miracle of baptism at least deserves praising God. He has just raised somebody from the dead!

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BEWARE OF

There was a loud growl from the other side of a six-foot wooden fence. Animals object to someone walking by on the sidewalk, even if they can't see the people. At the end of the fence was an unnecessary sign that said, "Beware of Dog." It clearly wasn't a cat on the other side of the fence. And the way the dog was growling, the sign was superfluous. Sometimes, though, we need such a sign, regardless of the order of the last three letters. As is often the case, the Bible is our signpost.

Domestic Dogs

Dogs have been working and living with people for thousands of years. They may not always have been what we call pets, but they have been domesticated.

Through most of man's history with the wolf or its descendants, those animals have been working animals. There is still a category in the American Kennel Club

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called "working dogs." They may be watchdogs, hunting dogs, or herding dogs. Historically, dogs worked for a living, rather than just laying around the house.

When Moses announced the final plague in Egypt, he even made reference to watchdogs. "But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast." (Ex 11:7) Even the dogs of the Egyptians would put up a wail. People were awakened in the middle of the night. That enough would set off the watchdogs. Add to that that many dogs that had litters still at home would wail because the oldest pup just died. And how many houses were unguarded because their watchdogs were the firstborn of their litter? But the watchdogs in Goshen were silent.

Old books can be revealing by what they mention. A passage from the 1400s makes reference to a shoehorn, indicating that tool is, surprisingly to some, at least that old. The book of Job is considered one of the earliest writings in history. If Job refers to something, then it must have been around for at least 5,000 years. It is not surprising, then, that Job says his working dogs (probably sheepdogs) are better than some people he knows.

But now they that are younger than I have me in derision, whose fathers I would have disdained to have set with the dogs of my flock. (Job 30:1)

Job held his dogs in high regard. Or he held some of his contemporaries in low regard. Probably both. In the history of insults, this one passes the test of time.

Dogs, whether working dogs or pets, often lived in the houses of families. When a woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, a non-Jew, sought healing from Jesus, he used these dogs as an example.

But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs. (Mk 7:27)

The woman responded, "Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs." (v. 28) Even then the dogs were the kitchen vacuum cleaners.

Beware of Dog

It is much easier to find biblical references to dangerous dogs than it is to find mention of household dogs. When Nicodemus came to see Jesus by night (Jn 3), he was taking his life in his hands. Not only might he be cast out of the Temple just for talking to Jesus, but he ventured out into the streets of Jerusalem in the dark. Jerusalem, like many cities of its time, was dangerous after the sun went down. The streets teemed with packs of feral dogs. They fed on the garbage that many householders dumped into the streets. These packs of dogs were not averse to attacking a lone human if they could find one after dark. Nicodemus was lucky to get to where Jesus was staying alive. (Or maybe he was protected by God so that we could read his story.)

Apparently this was not new when Nicodemus dared the dogs. David made reference to people as if they were the wild dogs of the city.

They return at evening: they make a noise like a dog, and go round about the city.... And at evening let them return; and let them make a noise like a dog, and go round about the city. (Ps 59:6, 14)

Wild dogs could be so dangerous that herders often carried clubs to beat them away from their sheep. At least, that is what we can infer from Goliath's question. "Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves?" (1 Sam 17:43) David was carrying his shepherd's gear when he faced the giant, and so Goliath mocked him for that.

Psalms 22 is considered a prophecy of the Messiah. So much of that psalm has a parallel in the execution of Jesus. Dogs are even mentioned in reference to the execution stake.

For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and

my feet. (Ps 22:16)

A few verses later, the psalmist asks that the promised one be delivered from the dogs. "Deliver my soul from the sword; my one from the power of the dog." (Ps 22:20)

The prophets were particularly unkind in their references to dogs. They looked upon them as the feral carnivores they were. Jeremiah spoke of four species of punishers, including dogs.

And I will appoint over them four kinds, saith the LORD: the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the earth, to devour and destroy. (Jer 15:3)

In this he was following the example of earlier prophets, although they usually limited it to two kinds. "Him that dieth of Jeroboam/Baasha/Ahab in the city shall the dogs eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat." (1 Kings 14:8, spoken by Ahijah to Jeroboam; 1 Kings 16:4, spoken by Jehu son of Hanani to Baasha; 1 Kings 21:24, spoken by Elijah of Ahab) The only difference in these three prophecies was the name of the recipient.

The most famous prophecy about the wild dogs of the city probably comes from Elijah, about the same time he spoke against Ahab. The one who incited Ahab to act so evilly was Isabella (aka Jezebel), his wife. Elijah prophesied her death. "And of Jezebel also spake the LORD, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel." (1 Kings 21:23) Some time later a young, unnamed, prophet anointed Jehu as the next king of Israel, and made the same prophecy. (2 Kings 9:10)

Jehu killed King Joram and rode to Jezreel. When Jezebel looked out the window, he had three of her eunuchs cast her down. She died and her blood spattered on the wall. Jehu, cold blooded, went to eat a meal, then sent people to bury the Queen Mother. "But they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands." (2 Kings 9:35) The dogs had eaten the rest of her, in accordance with prophecy.

President Lyndon Johnson angered a lot of people when he picked up Him Beagle Johnson by the ears. Solomon said, "He that passeth by, and meddleth with strife belonging not to him, is like one that taketh a dog by the ears." (Prov 26:17) No wonder there are angry dogs, when people have been picking them up by the ears for 4,000 years.

Beware of God

There are times to beware of dog, but there may be other times to beware of the other spelling using those three letters. God is loving, kind, and merciful. God is also jealous and takes vengeance.

There are those who make a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. They say the former is vengeful and wrathful, while the latter is loving and forgiving. Some of the time those who

take that position are trying to portray a God who forgives everyone and doesn't condemn anyone. That is not the God of the Bible, Old or New Testament. It is inconceivable that a God who demands faith and obedience would forgive those who are unbelieving and disobedient. That would indicate a lack of love toward those who make the effort to follow Him.

It is true that in the Old Testament God often dispensed justice immediately, whereas under the New Testament he shows more patience. For that we should be thankful. If God punished every sin immediately (which he did not even do then) none of us would stand a chance. In fact, the Old Testament shows a God of patience. He waited for Noah to preach and build the ark. He held Israel

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in Egypt until the iniquity of the Amorites was full. (Gen 15:16) He forgave Israel frequently, until their affairs with idols became too great.

It is not hard to find examples of God's immediate punishment. It begins with Adam and Eve. Although they did not suffer immediate physical death, others did. Nadab and Abihu died after offering strange fire. (Lev 10:2) Korah and his co-conspirators met instant death in an earthquake. (Numbers 16)

Even in the New Testament we have an example of a God who dispensed judgement immediately. In Acts 5 we read the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the apostles and to God. They were immediately struck dead.

God seems to be more forgiving because his punishment is not immediate. Nevertheless, the Bible is a sign that says "Beware of God." This is most clear when the author of the book of Hebrews compares those who "sin willfully" with the people of Israel.

He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb 10:29-31)

The sign says "Beware of God," but only if you turn your back on him. Otherwise, God is like a dog that is overjoyed to see you come through the door.

CONSTRUCTION TIME

One of my daily walks took me by a construction site. At first it was just an empty lot with a bunch of construction equipment. A few months later it began to look like there was activity at the site. After about a year I could tell it was going to be something big. Based on the framing, I guessed it might be a senior facility or a hotel. Over the next several months the walls and windows went in. One night someone climbed the scaffolding to the eighth floor and tagged the building with graffiti. After about two years I found out that it was a new Holiday Inn Express. It officially opened about two and a half years after I saw the first activity on the site.

There are some things in the Bible that took a while to build. There is really no significance to the amount of time it took to build. I want to compare some of those to the time it took to build that hotel, just for my own amusement, and maybe yours.

The first construction that comes to mind is the Temple. The Bible gives specific dates for the beginning and end of construction, but it actually took much longer than that time. King David began the planning and collection of materials for the Temple while he was alive, even though he wasn't allowed to begin construction. (1 Chron 22) It is not clear in which year of David's reign he decided to build a house for the Lord. It was probably several years before his death. Maybe we should just consider that period to be what would today be taken up in zoning permits, environmental impact studies, and the like. Then came the actual construction.

And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Zif, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD. ... And in the eleventh year, in the month Bul, which is the eighth month, was the house finished throughout all the parts thereof, and according to all the fashion of it. (1 Kings 6:1,38)

So it took seven years and six months in just the construction phase. That is considerably longer than building a Holiday Inn. Consider, though, that the Temple was made of dressed stone overlaid with cedar and then overlaid with gold. The moving of the stones would take much longer than wood frame and stucco.

An even more massive project took only fifty-two days. Nehemiah encouraged the people who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the wall of the city. In spite of opposition from the people who had occupied the city during the exile, the people worked together, each building a section of wall. "So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days." (Neh 6:15)

One observation can be drawn from this. When the people of God choose to work together, they can do great things in a relatively short period of time. When we work together, we can do great things.

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