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CHAPTER 1

JESUS, LORD OF THE MARRIAGE SUPPER

In lighter moments, we as pastors swap stories, funny stories about what has happened to us in the ministry. Weddings, I must tell you, are often the source of some of our most memorable moments. Here are a few:

- The organist looked over her shoulder as she ended the bridal march, but there was no bride at the altar!
- A groomsman stepped on the bride's train which was pinned to her wig; off it came just as the couple was departing the platform!

- When a groomsman fainted, the startled bride lifted her veil, as if seeing him directly would change the reality of what had happened!

Two thousand years ago there was a wedding that had its own memorable moment! The wine had run out. A shortage of wine was a serious cultural gaffe in a culture where drinking wine was considered essential to the joyous reception. Apparently, the needed amount had been underestimated. And, since hospitality was the center of the social structure, the empty pots stood as an embarrassment, even a cause for humiliating shame. In those days, drunkenness was scorned, but wine was common. “Without wine there is no joy,” said the rabbis.

“On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding” (John 2:1–2). Perhaps, as tradition has it, Mary was the sister of the groom’s mother. Or, some have suggested, this was the wedding of John, the disciple of Jesus, the man who wrote this New Testament book that bears his name. Perhaps; perhaps not.

Whatever the case, Jesus performed His first miracle, not at a funeral, but at a joyous wedding; not in a temple, but in a home. He was not a part of the monastic asceticism of the hermitic communities. “He came to comfort our sorrows,” writes J. C. Macaulay, “but also to sanctify our joys.”¹ Here, at an ordinary wedding in an ordinary home, He would secretly “reveal His glory.”

Wedding feasts, in that culture, would last for days. Of course, guests would come and go, extending their congratulations, bringing gifts, and enjoying wine. The final evening was the grand finale, and the couple was escorted to their

home with flaming torches, walking past the adoring crowd. No honeymoon as we know it; just open house for a week, and time to become more intimately acquainted.

“The third day” John refers to is to be counted from the last event, namely the dialogue between Jesus and Nathaniel near the Jordan River. The walk from there to Cana could have been made in two days, plenty of time for the final wedding extravaganza.

“They have no wine,” Mary whispered to her Son sitting close by.

Possibly she had some responsibility for the catering, and therefore felt an obligation to deal with the shortage. Keep in mind that her Son had not yet performed a single miracle, so Mary did not know what to expect. Her comment was probably given in faith mingled with both curiosity and doubt. (Whether or not Mary acts in the role of a mediator today, asking requests of her Son, is discussed in the “For Further Consideration” section at the end of this chapter.)

Jesus answers, “Dear woman, why do you involve me? . . . My time has not yet come” (John 2:4).

Discourteous? I don’t think so. I’m sure the tone of Jesus’ voice was soft and tender. Homer, the Greek historian, used the same expression for a man addressing his beloved wife. It was the title by which Augustus addressed Cleopatra, the famous Egyptian queen. And yet, we cannot help but sense the mild rebuke, “Why do you involve me?”

Jesus was giving her a gentle hint that everything had to be subjected to the divine will of the Father. She could no longer view Him as other mothers viewed their sons; indeed, in the future Jesus will put distance between Himself and His mother. She also was a sinner and needed to be redeemed by the sacrifice of her Son. She must no longer look upon Him

as her son, but as her Lord. As D. A. Carson points out, she could no longer approach Him on an “inside track.”

What did He mean by the expression, “My time has not yet come”?

Miracles were dependent on the Father’s timing and will. The Father who sent the Son scripted every task He was to do on earth; His life was marked off in detail by a divine decree. Later we will read that no one could take Him because “his time had not yet come” (John 7:30). Whether it was a miracle at a wedding or His death on the cross, every minute was subject to the divine timetable.

Though mildly rebuked, Mary wisely alerts the servants, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). She knew the servants might find it strange to receive orders from a guest. She also knew that He might ask them to do something that appeared foolish. Up front she wanted them to know that she expected them to do “whatever” He said.

“Luther bids us here to imitate her faith, who, nothing daunted by the semblance of a refusal, reads between the lines of this refusal a better answer to her prayer,” writes R. C. Trench.² Though His time had not yet come, she wanted the servants to be ready when it arrived. “Not till the wine was wholly exhausted would his *‘hour’* have arrived. All other help must fail, before the *‘hour’* of the great Helper will have struck.”

“Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons” (John 2:6). Multiply 20 to 30 gallons by six and you have some 120 to 180 gallons! These water pots, used in ceremonial washings, represented the old order of the Jewish law that Jesus would replace with something better. These stone pots stood as symbols of that elaborate system of

outward cleansing that could neither cleanse the conscience nor satisfy the deep yearnings of the soul. Perhaps we should understand that there is even significance in the number six, the number of imperfection.

And so, from those jugs, the servants drew the wine of the new epoch. As Phillip Yancey put it, "From purified water of the Pharisees came the choice new wine of a whole new era. The time for ritual cleansing had passed; the time for celebration had begun."³ William Barclay put it this way: "Jesus has come to turn the imperfection of the law into the perfection of grace."⁴

Consider: The bridegroom failed to make sure that the supply of wine would last for the entire feast. Jesus now takes over this responsibility, just as He will at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when He shall invite us to drink wine with Him "anew in his kingdom." This wedding feast is but a small picture of the joys that await us when we sit down with Him, and He shall serve us.

"Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water'; so they filled them to the brim" (v. 7). The servants, bless them, obeyed Jesus' command to the letter.

They did not ask, "Why this? We need wine, not water."

Nor did they ask, "How full will do?"

They filled the water pots so that at eye level the water seemed about to spill over the edge. "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.' They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew" (vv. 8-9).

When they awoke that morning, these servants, bless them, did not know that they would experience a miracle

that would reveal the “glory” of the promised Messiah. What blessings a day can bring! And as Macaulay says, “A brimful of blessings comes with a brimful of obedience.”⁵

THE BENEFITS OF OBEDIENCE

Yes, a brimful of obedience does bring a brimful of blessings. These servants, bless them, would witness that Immanuel was among them. The benefits of their obedience are remarkable indeed.

An Ordinary Task Became Extraordinary

An ordinary village.

An ordinary home.

An ordinary wedding.

Ordinary water pots.

Ordinary servants.

And, yet, what an extraordinary day!

This miracle brings Jesus into the center of ordinary life. No fanfare accompanied this revelation of His glory. No pronouncement from Jesus, no flash of light; no shrine was built to commemorate the miracle. No crowd marveled at it. The miracle was subdued and hidden, and as such stands in contrast to the coming wedding feast of the Lamb.

Nothing is ordinary after Christ has touched it. The common water pots brought forth uncommon wine.

In an ordinary hospital room, with a believer near death, I have experienced the “glory of God.” Surrounded by ordinary equipment and ordinary furniture, there has been the touch of the extraordinary. I have felt as if I was walking into the presence of God. And I was.

In a poor home, without running water, without rugs on

the rough floor, without extra clothes, and with a sick child in the one bedroom, I have seen the glory of God. This young couple was radiant, thanking God for His goodness. Such contentment in the midst of financial needs! Such peace in the midst of an uncertain future! The glory of God in very ordinary places!

Your office, your factory, and your home can become the very dwelling place of the resurrected Christ. Common water pots are filled with uncommon wine, and common hearts are filled with uncommon joy.

I'm told that Ruth Graham kept a plaque with these words in her kitchen, "Divine Service Accomplished Here Three Times Daily." Yes, ordinary dishes washed by ordinary hands can become an extraordinary work of grace.

Think of the faith of these servants! Faith to fill the huge pots and faith to give the "water" to the master of the banquet. And if the miracle occurred before they dipped their pitchers in the containers, they displayed faith that the wine would be to the liking of their master. They did what they could do, and Jesus did the rest. They were responsible for the possible, not the impossible.

Why so much wine? Would they need 150 gallons? The Supplier was seen for who He is: a Man who proved that in His presence the supply is always greater than the demand. He is the God of the "extras." The common has the aura of the divine presence.

We Come to Know the Secrets of the Lord

Obedience also gives us insight into the hidden counsels of God. The master of the banquet tasted the water that was made wine. "He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he

called the bridegroom aside and said, ‘Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now’” (John 2:9b–10). Imagine the surprise on the bridegroom’s face!

We are invited to visualize the scene: With a jug of wine in hand, the headwaiter called the bridegroom, perhaps in jest, and we could paraphrase, “Most people serve the good wine first. When the guests have well drunk . . . had their palates dulled and are in no position to judge the wine . . . then they serve that which is cheaper . . . but you have saved the best until now.”

The bridegroom was equally confused. He could not explain where the exceptional wine had come from. But, John comments, “The servants who had drawn the water knew” (v. 9). They were close to the power and saw the miracle before their eyes. They knew they had poured water into the pots; they also knew that they dipped wine out of them. And they knew that the Son of Mary was responsible for the transformation.

“The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him” (Psalm 25:14 KJV). Those who know God enjoy hidden moments of pleasure that are unknown to the world. They have understanding, insight, and the satisfaction of seeing God in the most unlikely places.

A woman commits her unbelieving husband to God, and she notices that he has a renewed interest in spiritual things. She begins to see encouraging signs that his attitude is beginning to change; he is beginning to open up to God as a flower to the sun. He doesn’t know why, but she does. She can interpret what is happening from a privileged point of view.

A new convert returns to his family, telling them that he

has “found God.” He knows that to accept Christ as Savior brings peace and a basic assurance that all is right with him and the Almighty. He is ridiculed by his relatives and friends; they accuse him of fanaticism and being spiritually gullible, but he knows what he knows. Whatever is said makes little difference, because he has experienced God’s power firsthand. He knows he can trust God with his future. Others don’t understand, but he has seen the glory of God.

And yet other blessings await those who are obedient.

We Are Assured That the Best Comes Last

“Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now” (John 2:10). As we have learned, the good wine puzzled the master of the banquet. It was contrary to custom to keep the good wine until the last. But when Jesus does a miracle, it is always done well. And yes, He saves the best till last.

The devil gives the best first. He makes promises he cannot keep and doles out his trinkets up front. He shields his victims from the coming heartache, pain, and impending eternity of torment. This life is the best they will ever experience. The prodigal son went to feast in the far country, and for a short while he had a “good time.” But when his money-bag ran out, he ate with the pigs. Those good times promise what they cannot deliver, and they do not last.

A young man who had a mountain of credit card debt chose to gamble, hoping for “the big win” that didn’t happen. As his debts grew, he increased his risk, and with it came emotional torment and hopelessness. One day he pulled a toy gun on a state trooper, provoking the officer to shoot the young man. On the seat of his car was a note, “Thank you for

delivering me from my debt.” When he put his first quarters into the slot machine, he had no idea that this path would be that bitter, that evil, that destructive. But the devil never shows you where he is taking you; he shows you only the enticing next step.

If you have never accepted Christ as Savior, my advice is that you enjoy this short window of time, for it will never get better, just eternally worse. But for those who know Christ as Savior, this is as bad as it will ever get. Sometimes our heavenly Father gives us a bitter cup to begin with, perhaps the cup of conviction of sin, but its purpose is that we might take the cup of salvation. Sometimes He gives us the cup of loneliness that we might drink from the cup of His presence. Or we are asked to drink from the cup of failure that we might remember that we serve Him alone. But a day is coming in which our fortunes will be reversed: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). The best is yet to come.

In Gethsemane, Jesus drank the bitter cup of emotional trauma; hours later on the cross, He refused the cup of vinegar so that He might drink the cup of suffering to its dregs. All that, so that He could invite us to participate in the joy of His triumphant resurrection and ascension. See Him in heaven today, and He will say, “The best is left till last.”

If Christ can take ordinary water and turn it into extraordinary wine, think of what we will have in the future. To the disciples He said, “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until the day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). There is a day coming when there will be plenty of wine for all—and the joy that goes with it.

“They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—the grain, the new wine and the oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more” (Jeremiah 31:12).

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills’” (Amos 9:13).

John describes the vision of the coming wedding feast:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”
(REVELATION 19:6–9)

F. B. Meyer wrote,

The Lord Jesus, on the other hand, is always giving something better. As the taste is being constantly refined, it is provided with more delicate and ravishing delights. That which you know of Him to-day is certainly better than that you tasted when first you sat down at his board. And so it will ever be. The angels, as his servants, have orders to bring in and set before the heirs of glory things which eye hath not seen, and man’s heart has not

conceived, but which are all prepared. The best of earth will be below the simplest fare of heaven. But what will heaven's best be! If wine in the peasant's house is so luscious, what will be the new wine in the Father's kingdom! What may we not expect from the vintages of the celestial hills! What will it be to sit at the marriage supper of the Lamb, not as guests, but as the Bride! Oh, hasten on, ye slow-moving days; be quick to depart, that we may taste that ravishment of bliss! But for ever and ever, as fresh revelations break on our glad souls, we shall look up to the Master of the feast and cry, "*Thou has kept the best until now.*"⁶

With some 150 to 180 gallons of wine at their disposal, I wonder how long the feast continued. These people knew they had been to a party! "Even as the Christian faith began at a banquet, so it will come to completion at a wedding feast."⁷ The wine will never run out.

Spurgeon wrote, "Fill the vessels up to the very brim. If you are to repent, ask to have a hearty and a deep repentance—full to the brim. If you are to believe, ask to have an intense absolute, childlike dependence, that your faith may be full to the brim. If you are bidden to pray, pray mightily; fill the vessel of prayer up to the brim."⁸

Yes, we shall drink wine anew in the coming kingdom. The Master of the wedding is already prepared.

To Jesus every day I find my heart is closer drawn,
He's fairer than the glory of the gold and purple dawn;
He's all my fancy pictured in its fairest dreams, and more;
Each day He grows still sweeter than He was the day
before.

—W. C. Martin

*Oh, Christ! He is the Fountain,
The deep sweet well of love!
The streams on earth I've tasted,
More deep I'll drink above:
There, to an ocean fulness,
His mercy doth expand,
And glory—glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's Land.*

—Anne R. Cousin

“This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him” (John 2:11). The word *sign* is used to refer to a miracle that points beyond the event itself to the one who did it. Or we could say that it is a physical sign of a spiritual reality. This miracle points to Christ as the Bridegroom who is preparing His bride for a blessed eternity. He is seen to be worthy of our belief, worthy of our devotion, and worthy of our love.

The Lord of our wedding feast assures us that the best is yet to come!

For Further Consideration

Mary's Role in Miracles

Mary's words to her Son, “They have no wine,” have often been used to support the idea that even today she has a role of intercession; the faithful, it is said, should pray to her because she has the ear of her Son. There is, however, nothing in the Bible to suggest that she hears the prayers that are offered in her name. We have every reason to believe that her spirit, like that of other saints, is localized in heaven, not on the earth; she is busy praising God, not responding to the

many pleas made daily to her in churches and homes around the world.

“But what about her miracles?” we are often asked. That question is best answered with a brief overview of the role of miracles within the Roman Catholic Church. Since we already gave a brief history of miracles in the previous chapter, we must turn now to miracles within the Catholic Church itself.

MIRACLES IN CHRISTENDOM

In the previous chapter I pointed out that when Christianity came to Rome, it entered a culture that was already rife with what might be called the cult of spirituality. Belief in the Roman gods meant belief in miraculous powers. Indeed, the primary purpose of the gods, as the pagans saw it, was to benefit human beings. In his classic book, *Counterfeit Miracles*, B. B. Warfield wrote, “Men floated in a world of miracles like a fish in water.”⁹ The more miraculous a story, the more it was believed. The whole population of the Roman Empire was caught in a “gigantic net of superstition.”

Christianity was deeply influenced by this atmosphere of unexamined spirituality. For example, the great and worthy theologian Augustine, though reliable in so many matters, actually believed that the flesh of a peacock was “incorruptible.” Pope Gregory the Great, in many ways an exemplary man, repeated a story of resurrection told by Augustine (except that it was of a different man in a different location). Briefly, it is said that the man died in Constantinople; the next day while being embalmed, his soul was conducted to the lower regions and appeared before a judge who refused to accept the man, insisting, “It was not this one, but Stephen

the smith that I ordered be brought.” Thus, the soul was returned to the body and the man lived.

Are we to believe this account told by both Augustine and Gregory? I think not. We should not be surprised that the same miracle is recorded by a pagan named Lucian 250 years before Augustine and 350 years before Gregory. This heathen clearly did not believe the story himself, but, interestingly, the superstitious Christians did! To quote Warfield again, “Nothing can change the central fact that both Augustine and Gregory report as having happened within their own knowledge an absurd story which a Lucian had already made ridiculous for all the world some centuries before.”¹⁰

This account and others like it, prove that Christians sometimes borrowed miraculous accounts from the pagan world and accepted them at face value. Regrettably, the whole body of heathen legends reproduced themselves within the church in Christianized forms. Miracles were seen everywhere, and few questioned their authenticity.

MIRACLES AT SHRINES

Perhaps you have heard the story that Mary appeared to a little country girl, Bernadette, in 1858 in Lourdes. “She was,” said the girl, “a girl in white, no bigger than I.” Mary had a gold and white rosary in her hands, and she smiled and said, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Interestingly, four years before this (1854), the Catholic Church officially accepted as dogma the “Immaculate Conception,” that is, that Mary herself was born of a virgin and was therefore without sin.

In 1990, Nancy Fowler of Conyers, Georgia, claimed that Mary had visited her in her farm home about thirty miles east of Atlanta. “The future holds no concern to those who truly seek God and truly love him and remain in his

favor,” she told the crowd. For four years she delivered the same message on the thirteenth of each month. Then she announced that Mary would appear only once a year, on October 13. The crowd has steadily increased during the years, though she said that 1998 would be the last appearance of Mary on her farm. A hundred thousand people gathered as Fowler read to them for some thirty minutes.¹¹

These visions, it should be noted, were not endorsed by the local Catholic Church, but people visited all the way from Mexico. Many claim they have either been healed or helped by meeting on this location. And even if the help is not directly evident, many who attended said they felt better, more in touch with their spiritual selves as a result of the visit.

What can we say about the miracles said to take place at Lourdes? Many who attend say that the experience enabled them to accept their own illness because they met many that were worse off than they were. And those who work at the shrine say that the people they meet and the opportunities for serving others changes their perspective on what is truly valuable in life. Despite the obvious commercialism, many testify that the atmosphere is one of religious devotion, heartfelt friendships, and peace in the midst of the curious crowds.

Even the most devout observers admit that only a small percentage of the hundreds of thousands of sick who come to Lourdes experience healing of some kind. At least 90 percent of those seeking cures go away without benefit. (As we shall discover in a later chapter, this is also the case in the healing meetings held by protestant faith healers.)

To the credit of the Catholic Church, miracles are not officially accepted without evidence. For example, the Under

Secretary at the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints investigates miracles because at least one or two are necessary in order for an individual to be declared a saint. The theory is that a saint, after death, will be active on earth, answering prayers and persuading God to help sufferers below. Thus a committee consults with medical experts to determine whether indeed a miracle happened in response to petitions made in the name of the departed saint.

Interestingly, Mother Teresa, who died in 1997, was given a speedier route to sainthood because two miracles have been attributed to her. One apparently happened in the United States, where a French woman broke several ribs in a car accident and was reportedly healed when she wore a Mother Teresa medallion around her neck. In the other miracle, a Palestinian girl suffering from cancer was apparently cured after Mother Teresa appeared in her dreams and said, "Child, you are healed."¹²

The International Medical Committee for the Shrine at Lourdes also evaluates evidence for miracles. Since all the miracles at the shrine are attributed to the intercession of Mary, this committee is not caught up in the saint-making process. According to *Time* magazine, no miracle has been approved since 1989. As medical science and psychology uncover rational explanations for more cures, it is increasingly difficult to name something a miracle.¹³

Of course there may be cures of some sort that are not officially classified as miracles. French doctors often recommend a trip to Lourdes for those who are terminally ill, knowing that this is their last hope and that the faith that one will be healed has beneficial psychological effects. Even so, the number of disappointed people is beyond calculation. Of course, most who return home unhealed do not blame

the Virgin, but themselves: if only they had more faith; if only they had done more good deeds; if only they had been more faithful in praying the rosary. Whatever the case, the higher the hope, the deeper the despair.

To what do we ascribe the miracles that some say happened to them at Lourdes or other shrines? First, we cannot underestimate the power of suggestion. Those who make the trek believing they will be healed might find that their faith has helped them. Many ailments are psychosomatic; that is, they are either induced or perpetuated by the influence of the mind. Lourdes can change the disposition of the mind and, therefore, also the disposition of the body.

The miracles at Lourdes are much more akin to the healings reported by the Christian Science faith. I've browsed through books published by this religious group, reading one account of healing after another. But in most instances these miracles are those that can be explained psychologically; we cannot discount the power of the mind to overcome some of the maladies of the body.

Second, even if we admit that the number of miracles is much greater than those officially confirmed, many healings are incomplete. If we think that Mary performs these miracles instantly and completely, we are mistaken. When a physician wondered why the Virgin contented herself with healing a sore on the child's leg but not replacing the entire deformed foot, the answer given was that the scar on the leg remained as a testimony to the greatness of the miracle. Indeed, we are told that many miracles are partially accomplished so that the recipient remains in "grateful memory of the benefit received."¹⁴

In contrast, whenever Christ or the apostles performed a miracle in the New Testament, it was done completely and

fully, instantly. It is inconceivable that God would intervene to heal a sore foot but leave the lacerated leg unhealed.

Third, at Lourdes everyone is invited to be healed, regardless of their doctrinal convictions, no matter what their devotion or their religion. At first blush this might seem as a plus; after all, Mary stands with arms open to all, without distinction. Indeed, the benefits of Mary are believed to be the common property of the whole world, regardless of one's religion or gods.¹⁵ It is a message that dovetails with the tolerance of the day.

But wait.

If Mary has her arms open to all, regardless of the god they worship, then we have no reason to think that these miracles are performed by God through Christ. The miracles in the New Testament were done by the apostles, who understood that Christ was the only way to God, and therefore miracles were to be done “in his name” (Acts 3:16 *KJV*). When Peter encountered Simon the sorcerer, who “amazed all the people of Samaria” (Acts 8:9), Peter confronted him directly. Simon tried to buy the right to perform greater miracles—miracles of the caliber of Peter—but Peter responded, “You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin” (vv. 21–23). Your doctrine and the condition of your heart are essential if you want to see miracles.

Let us not overlook the fact that when the Israelites worshiped the pagan goddess Tamaz, whom they called “the queen of heaven” (Jeremiah 44:17 *NASB*), they insisted that it was she who gave them crops and food. In fact, they had the audacity to say, “But since we stopped burning sacrifices

to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have met our end by the sword and by famine” (v. 18 NASB). The Israelites were convinced that their prayers to a pagan goddess paid dividends; they were better off because of their false worship.

God would have none of it and told them that such worship was an abomination. But mark it well: It is possible to benefit from false worship; it is possible to claim miracles of provision and help. But even such “miracles” do not justify wrong doctrines. Remember that our only hope of interpreting a miracle correctly involves a careful study of the doctrinal context in which it is performed.

In his book *Expect a Miracle*, Dan Wakefield records that his search for miracles led him to many different shrines and many different religions. He discovered that every religion has its miracles. Buddhism has stories of “Tara healing people. . . . [In] times of despair you can call on her and she reaches out and comes to the rescue.”¹⁶ The Hindus have visions, encounters, rituals, and miracles. He quotes the *Washington Post* report that the power of prayer is gaining validity in helping the sick recover. Interestingly, regardless of the religion or deity, the beneficial effects are about the same.¹⁷ Clearly, we need biblical discernment in this age rife with miracles.

The Bible does not sanction miracles performed by just any person or any god. To say that it does not matter what you believe is to say that it does not matter in whose name you are healed. Indeed, even those who performed miracles in the name of Christ were excluded from heaven because they did not understand their need of redemption (Matthew 7:21–22). I must say it again: *Not everything that is miraculous is from God.*

CHRIST VS. MARY

On a plane I met a group of people en route to Europe to visit various places where “Mary sightings” have occurred. They insisted, first, that in these places authentic apparitions of Mary had occurred; and, second, that these sightings, with their attendant miracles, in no way detracted from the miracles of Christ. Let Christ do His miracles and let His mother do hers.

But the matter is not that simple.

First, contrary to Catholic protests, this pursuit of the miraculous Mary “sightings” does detract from Christ. It is based on the assumption that the miracles of Christ are insufficient; we must follow some other miracle worker. It is a scandal beyond irony that millions of people flock to shrines of Mary with more hope, more anticipation, and more confidence than they have when they open the Bible.

I have visited the shrine of Guadalupe in Mexico and have seen crowds crawl with bleeding knees for hundreds of yards, approaching the shrine with the hope that they will win the favor of the Virgin Mary. Many are women with infants in their arms, hoping to appease her. In Mexico, a form of Christianity blends nicely with pagan superstitions and legends.

Perhaps the argument could be made that this is not actually Catholicism, but a blend of Catholicism and pagan superstitions. Yet, interestingly, official Catholicism does not condemn these heretical beliefs and practices. Indeed the Pope performed mass at the shrine in 1999 without a single word of rebuke for the superstitions, paganism, and commercialism they encourage.

Second, since these healings, if they occur, fall into the same category as those of the Christian Science religion or

the New Age Movement, we must raise the possibility that Satan might be at work as well. We know that he will appear in whatever form he is expected. If you are Catholic, he will appear as Mary; if you are Protestant, he will appear as Jesus; and if you are a Hindu, he will appear as Krishna. To put it simply, either miracles are based on Christ and the Bible, or else they connect us with the world of the occult, with its deceptions and demons. There are, after all, only two “miracle workers” in the universe.

The Catholic Church itself recognizes the possibility of deception. We can do no better than to accept the counsel of Ignatius Loyola, who, when consulted about a young man who claimed that the wounds of Christ miraculously appeared in his hands, said that these marks “might just as well have been the work of the devil as of God.”¹⁸ Agreed.