

A Sample From

**THE MIRACLES
OF OUR LORD**

BY

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Published by
R. A. SITES BOOKS
Clearwater, Florida

<http://www.cafepress.com/roysites>

THE MIRACLES OF OUR LORD

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I.

INTRODUCTION.

I HAVE been requested to write some papers on our Lord's miracles. I venture the attempt in the belief that, seeing they are one of the modes in which his unseen life found expression, we are bound through them to arrive at some knowledge of that life. For he has come, The Word of God, that we may know God: every word of his then, as needful to the knowing of himself, is needful to the knowing of God, and we must understand, as far as we may, every one of his words and every one of his actions, which, with him, were only another form of word. I believe this the immediate end of our creation. And I believe that this will at length result in the unravelling for us of what must now, more or less, appear to every man the knotted and twisted coil of the universe.

It seems to me that it needs no great power of faith to believe in the miracles—for true faith is a power, not a mere yielding. There are far harder things to believe than the miracles. For a man is not required to believe in them save as believing in Jesus. If a man can believe that there is a God, he may well believe that, having made creatures capable of hungering and thirsting for him, he must be capable of speaking a word to guide them in their feeling after him. And if he is a grand God, a God worthy of being God, yea (his metaphysics even may show the seeker), if he is a God capable of being God, he will speak the clearest grandest word of guidance which he can utter intelligible to his creatures. For us, that word must simply be the gathering of all the expressions of his visible works into an infinite human face,

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lighted up by an infinite human soul behind it, namely, that potential essence of man, if I may use a word of my own, which was in the beginning with God. If God should thus hear the cry of the noblest of his creatures, for such are all they who do cry after him, and in very deed show them his face, it is but natural to expect that the deeds of the great messenger should be just the works of the Father done in little. If he came to reveal his Father in miniature, as it were (for in these unspeakable things we can but use figures, and the homeliest may be the holiest), to tone down his great voice, which, too loud for men to hear it aright, could but sound to them as an inarticulate thundering, into such a still small voice as might enter their human ears in welcome human speech, then the works that his Father does so widely, so grandly that they transcend the vision of men, the Son must do briefly and sharply before their very eyes.

This, I think, is the true nature of the miracles, an epitome of God's processes in nature beheld in immediate connection with their source—a source as yet lost to the eyes and too often to the hearts of men in the far—receding gradations of continuous law. That men might see the will of God at work, Jesus did the works of his Father thus.

Here I will suppose some honest, and therefore honourable, reader objecting: But do you not thus place the miracles in dignity below the ordinary processes of nature? I answer: The miracles are mightier far than any goings on of nature as beheld by common eyes, dissociating them from a living Will; but the miracles are surely less than those mighty goings on of nature with God beheld at their heart. In the name of him who delighted to say "My Father is greater than I," I will say that his miracles in bread and in wine were far less grand and less beautiful than the works of the Father they represented, in making the corn to grow in the valleys, and the grapes to drink the sunlight on the hill-sides of the world, with all their infinitudes of tender gradation and delicate mystery of birth. But the Son of the Father be praised, who, as it were, condensed these mysteries before us, and let us see the precious gifts coming at once from gracious hands—hands that love could kiss and nails could wound.

There are some, I think, who would perhaps find it more possible to accept the New Testament story if the miracles did not

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stand in the way. But perhaps, again, it would be easier for them, to accept both if they could once look into the true heart of these miracles. So long as they regard only the surface of them, they will, most likely, see in them only a violation of the laws of nature: when they behold the heart of them, they will recognize there at least a possible fulfilment of her deepest laws.

With such, however, is not my main business now, any more than with those who cannot believe in a God at all, and therefore to whom a miracle is an absurdity. I may, however, just make this one remark with respect to the latter—that perhaps it is better they should believe in no God than believe in such a God as they have yet been able to imagine. Perhaps thus they are nearer to a true faith—except indeed they prefer the notion of the Unconscious generating the Conscious, to that of a self-existent Love, creative in virtue of its being love. Such have never loved woman or child save after a fashion which has left them content that death should seize on the beloved and bear them back to the maternal dust. But I doubt if there can be any who thus would choose a sleep-walking Pan before a wakeful Father. At least, they cannot know the Father and choose the Pan.

Let us then recognize the works of the Father as epitomized in the miracles of the Son. What in the hands of the Father are the mighty motions and progresses and conquests of life, in the hands of the Son are miracles. I do not myself believe that he valued the working of these miracles as he valued the utterance of the truth in words; but all that he did had the one root, obedience, in which alone can any son be free. And what is the highest obedience? Simply a following of the Father—a doing of what the Father does. Every true father wills that his child should be as he is in his deepest love, in his highest hope. All that Jesus does is of his Father. What we see in the Son is of the Father. What his works mean concerning him, they mean concerning the Father.

Much as I shrink from the notion of a formal shaping out of design in any great life, so unlike the endless freedom and spontaneity of nature (and He is the Nature of nature), I cannot help observing that his first miracle was one of creation—at least, is to our eyes more like creation than almost any other—for who can say that it was creation, not knowing in the least what creation is, or what was the process in this miracle?

II.

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ALREADY Jesus had his disciples, although as yet he had done no mighty works. They followed him for himself and for his mighty words. With his mother they accompanied him to a merry-making at a wedding. With no retiring regard, with no introverted look of self-consciousness or self-withdrawal, but more human than any of the company, he regarded their rejoicings with perfect sympathy, for, whatever suffering might follow, none knew so well as he that—

"there is one
Who makes the joy the last in every song."

The assertion in the old legendary description of his person and habits, that he was never known to smile, I regard as an utter falsehood, for to me it is incredible—almost as a geometrical absurdity. In that glad company the eyes of a divine artist, following the spiritual lines of the group, would have soon settled on his face as the centre whence radiated all the gladness, where, as I seem to see him, he sat in the background beside his mother. Even the sunny face of the bridegroom would appear less full of light than his. But something is at hand which will change his mood. For no true man had he been if his mood had never changed. His high, holy, obedient will, his tender, pure, strong heart never changed, but his mood, his feeling did change. For the mood must often, and in many cases ought to be the human reflex of changing circumstance. The change comes from his mother. She whispers to him that they have no more wine. The bridegroom's liberality had reached the limit of his means, for, like his guests, he was, most probably, of a humble calling, a craftsman, say, or a fisherman. It must have been a painful little trial to him if he knew the fact; but I doubt if he heard of the want before it was supplied.

There was nothing in this however to cause the change in our Lord's mood of which I have spoken. It was no serious

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catastrophe, at least to him, that the wine should fail. His mother had but told him the fact; only there is more than words in every commonest speech that passes. It was not his mother's words, but the tone and the look with which they were interwoven that wrought the change. She knew that her son was no common man, and she believed in him, with an unripe, unfeatured faith. This faith, working with her ignorance and her fancy, led her to expect the great things of the world from him. This was a faith which must fail that it might grow. Imperfection must fail that strength may come in its place. It is well for the weak that their faith should fail them, for it may at the moment be resting its wings upon the twig of some brittle fancy, instead of on a branch of the tree of life.

But, again, what was it in his mother's look and tone that should work the change in our Lord's mood? The request implied in her words could give him no offence, for he granted that request; and he never would have done a thing he did not approve, should his very mother ask him. The thoughts of the mother lay not in her words, but in the expression that accompanied them, and it was to those thoughts that our Lord replied. Hence his answer, which has little to do with her spoken request, is the key both to her thoughts and to his. If we do not understand his reply, we may misunderstand the miracle—certainly we are in danger of grievously misunderstanding him—a far worse evil. How many children are troubled in heart that Jesus should have spoken to his mother as our translation compels them to suppose he did speak! "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come." His hour for working the miracle had come, for he wrought it; and if he had to do with one human soul at all, that soul must be his mother. The "woman," too, sounds strange in our ears. This last, however, is our fault: we allow words to sink from their high rank, and then put them to degraded uses. What word so full of grace and tender imagings to any true man as that one word! The Saviour did use it to his mother; and when he called her woman, the good custom of the country and the time was glorified in the word as it came from his lips fulfilled of humanity; for those lips were the open gates of a heart full of infinite meanings. Hence whatever word he used had more of the human in it than that word had ever held before.

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What he did say was this—"Woman, what is there common to thee and me? My hour is not yet come." What! was not their humanity common to them? Had she not been fit, therefore chosen, to bear him? Was she not his mother? But his words had no reference to the relation between them; they only referred to the present condition of her mind, or rather the nature of the thought and expectation which now occupied it. Her hope and his intent were at variance; there was no harmony between his thought and hers; and it was to that thought and that hope of hers that his words were now addressed. To paraphrase the words—and if I do so with reverence and for the sake of the spirit which is higher than the word, I think I am allowed to do so—"Woman, what is there in your thoughts now that is in sympathy with mine? Also the hour that you are expecting is not come yet."

What, then, was in our Lord's thoughts? and what was in his mother's thoughts to call forth his words? She was thinking the time had come for making a show of his power—for revealing what a great man he was—for beginning to let that glory shine, which was, in her notion, to culminate in the grandeur of a righteous monarch—a second Solomon, forsooth, who should set down the mighty in the dust, and exalt them of low degree. Here was the opportunity for working like a prophet of old, and revealing of what a mighty son she was the favoured mother.

And of what did the glow of her face, the light in her eyes, and the tone with which she uttered the words, "They have no wine," make Jesus think? Perhaps of the decease which he must accomplish at Jerusalem; perhaps of a throne of glory betwixt the two thieves; certainly of a kingdom of heaven not such as filled her imagination, even although her heaven-descended Son was the king thereof. A kingdom of exulting obedience, not of acquiescence, still less of compulsion, lay germed in his bosom, and he must be laid in the grave ere that germ could send up its first green lobes into the air of the human world. No throne, therefore, of earthly grandeur for him! no triumph for his blessed mother such as she dreamed! There was nothing common in their visioned ends. Hence came the change of mood to Jesus, and hence the words that sound at first so strange, seeming to have so little to do with the words of his mother.

But no change of mood could change a feeling towards

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mother or friends. The former, although she could ill understand what he meant, never fancied in his words any unkindness to her. She, too, had the face of the speaker to read; and from that face came such answer to her prayer for her friends, that she awaited no confirming words, but in the confidence of a mother who knew her child, said at once to the servants, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it."

If any one object that I have here imagined too much, I would remark, first, that the records in the Gospel are very brief and condensed; second, that the germs of a true intelligence must lie in this small seed, and our hearts are the soil in which it must unfold itself; third, that we are bound to understand the story, and that the foregoing are the suppositions on which I am able to understand it in a manner worthy of what I have learned concerning Him. I am bound to refuse every interpretation that seems to me unworthy of Him, for to accept such would be to sin against the Holy Ghost. If I am wrong in my idea either of that which I receive or of that which I reject, as soon as the fact is revealed to me I must cast the one away and do justice to the other. Meantime this interpretation seems to me to account for our Lord's words in a manner he will not be displeased with even if it fail to reach the mark of the fact. That St John saw, and might expect such an interpretation to be found in the story, barely as he has told it, will be rendered the more probable if we remember his own similar condition and experience when he and his brother James prayed the Lord for the highest rank in his kingdom, and received an answer which evidently flowed from the same feeling to which I have attributed that given on this occasion to his mother.

" 'Fill the water-pots with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. 'Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.' And they bare it. 'Thou hast kept the good wine until now.' " It is such a thing of course that, when our Lord gave them wine, it would be of the best, that it seems almost absurd to remark upon it. What the Father would make and will make, and that towards which he is ever working, is the Best; and when our Lord turns the water into wine it must be very good.

It is like his Father, too, not to withhold good wine because men abuse it. Enforced virtue is unworthy of the name. That men

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may rise above temptation, it is needful that they should have temptation. It is the will of him who makes the grapes and the wine. Men will even call Jesus himself a wine-bibber. What matters it, so long as he works as the Father works, and lives as the Father wills?

I dare not here be misunderstood. God chooses that men should be tried, but let a man beware of tempting his neighbour. God knows how and how much, and where and when: man is his brother's keeper, and must keep him according to his knowledge. A man may work the will of God for others, and be condemned therein because he sought his own will and not God's. That our Lord gave this company wine, does not prove that he would have given any company wine. To some he refused even the bread they requested at his hands. Because he gave wine to the wedding-guests, shall man dig a pit at the corner of every street, that the poor may fall therein, spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not? Let the poor man be tempted as God wills, for the end of God is victory; let not man tempt him, for his end is his neighbour's fall, or at best he heeds it not for the sake of gain, and he shall receive according to his works.

To him who can thank God with free heart for his good wine, there is a glad significance in the fact that our Lord's first miracle was this turning of water into wine. It is a true symbol of what he has done for the world in glorifying all things. With his divine alchemy he turns not only water into wine, but common things into radiant mysteries, yea, every meal into a eucharist, and the jaws of the sepulchre into an outgoing gate. I do not mean that he makes any change in the things or ways of God, but a mighty change in the hearts and eyes of men, so that God's facts and God's meanings become their faiths and their hopes. The destroying spirit, who works in the commonplace, is ever covering the deep and clouding the high. For those who listen to that spirit great things cannot be. Such are there, but they cannot see them, for in themselves they do not aspire. They believe, perhaps, in the truth and grace of their first child: when they have spoiled him, they laugh at the praises of childhood. From all that is thus low and wretched, incapable and fearful, he who made the water into wine delivers men, revealing heaven around them, God

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in all things, truth in every instinct, evil withering and hope springing even in the path of the destroyer.

That the wine should be his first miracle, and that the feeding of the multitudes should be the only other creative miracle, will also suggest many thoughts in connection with the symbol he has left us of his relation to his brethren. In the wine and the bread of the eucharist, he reminds us how utterly he has given, is giving, himself for the gladness and the strength of his Father's children. Yea more; for in that he is the radiation of the Father's glory, this bread and wine is the symbol of how utterly the Father gives himself to his children, how earnestly he would have them partakers of his own being. If Jesus was the son of the Father, is it hard to believe that he should give men bread and wine?

It was not his power, however, but his glory, that Jesus showed forth in the miracle. His power could not be hidden, but it was a poor thing beside his glory. Yea, power in itself is a poor thing. If it could stand alone, which it cannot, it would be a horror. No amount of lonely power could create. It is the love that is at the root of power, the power of power, which alone can create. What then was this his glory? What was it that made him glorious? It was that, like his Father, he ministered to the wants of men. Had they not needed the wine, not for the sake of whatever show of his power would he have made it. The concurrence of man's need and his love made it possible for that glory to shine forth. It is for this glory most that we worship him. But power is no object of adoration, and they who try to worship it are slaves. Their worship is no real worship. Those who trembled at the thunder from the mountain went and worshipped a golden calf; but Moses went into the thick darkness to find his God.

How far the expectation of the mother Mary that her son would, by majesty of might, appeal to the wedding guests, and arouse their enthusiasm for himself, was from our Lord's thoughts, may be well seen in the fact that the miracle was not beheld even by the ruler of the feast; while the report of it would probably receive little credit from at least many of those who partook of the good wine. So quietly was it done, so entirely without pre-intimation of his intent, so stolenly, as it were, in the two simple ordered acts, the filling of the water-pots with water,

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and the drawing of it out again, as to make it manifest that it was done for the ministration. He did not do it even for the show of his goodness, but to be good. This alone could show his Father's goodness. It was done because here was an opportunity in which all circumstances combined with the bodily presence of the powerful and the prayer of his mother, to render it fit that the love of his heart should go forth in giving his merry-making brothers and sisters more and better wine to drink.

And herein we find another point in which this miracle of Jesus resembles the working of his Father. For God ministers to us so gently, so stolenly, as it were, with such a quiet, tender, loving absence of display, that men often drink of his wine, as these wedding guests drank, without knowing whence it comes—without thinking that the giver is beside them, yea, in their very hearts. For God will not compel the adoration of men: it would be but a pagan worship that would bring to his altars. He will rouse in men a sense of need, which shall grow at length into a longing; he will make them feel after him, until by their search becoming able to behold him, he may at length reveal to them the glory of their Father. He works silently—keeps quiet behind his works, as it were, that he may truly reveal himself in the right time. With this intent also, when men find his wine good and yet do not rise and search for the giver, he will plague them with sore plagues, that the good wine of life may not be to them, and therefore to him and the universe, an evil thing. It would seem that the correlative of creation is search; that as God has made us, we must find him; that thus our action must reflect his; that thus he glorifies us with a share in the end of all things, which is that the Father and his children may be one in thought, judgment, feeling, and intent, in a word, that they may mean the same thing. St John says that Jesus thus "manifested forth his glory, and his disciples believed on him." I doubt if any but his disciples knew of the miracle; or of those others who might see or hear of it, if any believed on him because of it. It is possible to see a miracle, and not believe in it; while many of those who saw a miracle of our Lord believed in the miracle, and yet did not believe in him.

I wonder how many Christians there are who so thoroughly believe God made them that they can laugh in God's name; who understand that God invented laughter and gave it to his children.

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Such belief would add a keenness to the zest in their enjoyment, and slay that sneering laughter of which a man grimaces to the fiends, as well as that feeble laughter in which neither heart nor intellect has a share. It would help them also to understand the depth of this miracle. The Lord of gladness delights in the laughter of a merry heart. These wedding guests could have done without wine, surely without more wine and better wine. But the Father looks with no esteem upon a bare existence, and is ever working, even by suffering, to render life more rich and plentiful. His gifts are to the overflowing of the cup; but when the cup would overflow, he deepens its hollow, and widens its brim. Our Lord is profuse like his Father, yea, will, at his own sternest cost, be lavish to his brethren. He will give them wine indeed.

But even they who know whence the good wine comes, and joyously thank the giver, shall one day cry out, like the praiseful ruler of the feast to him who gave it not, "Thou hast kept the good wine until now."