

# INTRODUCTION

*I will pour out  
my spirit upon all mankind.  
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
your [children] shall see visions;  
Even upon the servants and the handmaids,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.  
And I will work wonders in the heavens and on the earth, . . . .  
Then everyone shall be rescued  
who calls on the name of the Lord.*

—JOEL 3:1–3, 5



Signs and wonders—as intimate as a flower at one moment, at other moments majestic and powerful, but always providing outward evidence of the unseen reality: God is near. Although faith should never depend on such things, we are mystical as well as

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physical beings, and we need a touch of the sacred now and then to remind us of our eternal home.

However, many believe that signs and wonders are occurring more frequently today. They note a subtle undercurrent of heavenly awareness and activity, perhaps the seeds of a spiritual renaissance, being experienced not just by seers but by the rank and file. In a June 1992 report, the Princeton Religion Research Center found that “seven in ten Americans say their faith has changed significantly, with equal proportions saying it came about as a result of a lot of thought and discussion [or] as a result of a strong emotional experience.”

Of course, such things do go in cycles. If we trace the history of Christianity, for example, we see that the charismatic gifts, such as prophecy, visions, and speaking in tongues, faded after the first centuries, giving rise to a more structured church community. Gradually humankind shifted from a constant awareness of the divine to a more scientific emphasis, culminating in the eighteenth century’s Age of Reason. Eventually “the supernatural became folklore, relegated to the dustbin of superstition, and ridiculed,” explains Michael Brown, author of *The Trumpet of Gabriel*. “Who needed God’s light? When man wanted light, he now walked to a switch and turned on the electricity.”

But as we reached more recent times, there were indications that ignoring the “God-shaped hole within us” (which, as philosopher Blaise Pascal noted, cannot be filled with anything but God) was not

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working. Society, with its increase in crime and poverty, its lowering of moral standards, families at risk, promiscuity, racial divisions, and pervasive despair, seemed out of control, at some kind of critical threshold.

It was then, many believe, that a reappraisal began. What was missing? And was a concerned heavenly Father actually sending specific signals, wake-up calls to convince the oblivious and skeptical that our priorities had gotten skewed, that it was necessary to “seek *first* the Kingdom of God”? After a near-death experience (NDE), author Roberts Liardon described this view very specifically: “I was told that [in a period coming soon] God would pour out his spirit on *everyone*; we all would come into contact with the power of the Lord in some way. People would then be faced with a choice, as to what and whether to believe. A surge of manifestation of God’s power would come on the youth, both male and female. They would have visions, supernatural dreams, and prophecy.”<sup>1</sup>

It seems to be happening. “We live in an exceptional time,” said Dr. Peter Wagner, professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, in an April 10, 1995, interview with *Time* magazine. “In the Middle Ages in Europe, perhaps, there may have been something comparable. But certainly in the history of the United States we have never seen such a frequency of signs and wonders.” That *Time* and other major media outlets would be covering this topic at all is indicative of the truth of Wagner’s statement.

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Of course, many people are hesitant about signs and wonders, miracles and other subjective experiences, fearing that they might be associated with serious spiritual error, fraud, or even occult practices. Such concern is necessary, and we should always pray to discern such manifestations correctly. But although there undoubtedly are false miracles—and false prophets—these should not negate the things of heaven. Supernatural signs and wonders do seem to be increasing. So what exactly are we seeing today?

### **Life Hereafter**

Consider the growing awareness and acknowledgment of NDEs, first chronicled by Drs. Raymond Moody and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in the 1970s. Although considered by some scientists as mere chemical changes in the brain, NDEs nonetheless gained validity as millions reported the death process as visiting a glorious place of light. Ultimately, instead of a final judgment, these witnesses say, God permitted them to return to earth because of work left undone or family responsibilities. “Then I knew. I had to go back. Someone who loved me still needed me,” wrote the late Catherine Marshall, depicting her mother’s near-death experience in the award-winning book *Christy*. “The light was not for me. Not yet. But sometime. Oh, *sometime!*”

Characteristically, those who have experienced NDEs undergo a spiritual renewal. Most also say they have lost their fear of death,

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because of a wonderful reassurance that this life is not all there is. And their accounts are particularly consoling for survivors who have lost loved ones, especially under difficult circumstances. Physician Ron Kennedy, attacked in his home after returning from a business trip, described an actual *stopping* of the material world (and his own pain and fear), replaced by a feeling of being surrounded by “a sea of enormous love. It has occurred to me that if this light could appear to me, then those people you love who have died, and maybe in the most extreme circumstances, did not die alone as you would fear that they did: they died with great love around, and peace as well.”<sup>2</sup>

An interesting offshoot of the NDE is a circumstance called near-death awareness (NDA), when dying people seem to interact with heaven in a visionary way. Such episodes were once dismissed as hallucinations, but are now increasingly chronicled by both laypeople and medical personnel.

NDA occurs most typically when a dying person, often wearing a look of wonder and joy, begins to reach, smile, wave, or even talk with someone invisible to others. An elderly man described people sitting with him in quiet comfort, but explained that he was not permitted to tell his daughter who they were. “Do you recognize them?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” the father responded, “and the music is beautiful!”

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“These [happenings] give us glimpses of whatever dimension exists beyond the life we know,” says Maggie Callanan, author of *Final Gifts*, a book about NDA, “and show us how we might take comfort from these reunions and messages.”

### **Angels around Us**

In 1991, in my introduction to *Where Angels Walk*, I wrote, “Angels don’t get much attention today.” Was I wrong! Although I didn’t yet know it, a force was gathering and would soon explode into a huge international trend. From it have come television documentaries, stores specializing in angel items, countless books on the subject, and most encouraging, a growing army of witnesses testifying to personal angel encounters and resulting spiritual growth—in a secular, disbelieving world—just as biblical figures did. Hero pilot Scott O’Grady, rescued from enemy territory in Bosnia in April 1995, willingly told the media about a voice and a “protective presence” that kept him reassured during those difficult days. “An Angel Brings Rescuer to Victims” declared a no-longer unusual front-page headline in the Canton, Ohio, *Repository* on December 26, 1994. The most recent polls on this topic, done by Fox News and Gallup, each revealed that over 75 percent of Americans now believe in angels.

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Why the interest? Perhaps more relevant: Why now? “The world is filled with spiritual warfare,” said Bishop Job, of the Midwest Russian Orthodox Church of America, in a recent video on angels.<sup>3</sup> “We see it in every aspect of our society, of current affairs. . . . Life has become a complete tension between good and evil.” People are putting their trust in the natural world where they can easily be led astray, he believes, rather than in God and what God has revealed. Perhaps God is sending angels to remind us of these errors, and to draw our attention back to spiritual concerns.

### **Clouds of Witnesses**

In addition to angels, some people believe they have experienced unexpected contact with loved ones now in heaven. Events such as these were once considered grief-induced fantasies, and kept secret—it is one thing to believe, however tentatively, that God might send an angel to bring comfort or help someone in need. But to send those now living in eternity? Hardly.

However, with near-death and angel experiences gaining credibility, society seems to be awakening to other mystical possibilities. “Once we accept that a light can come to us when we die, and we can interact with that light, we must . . . [recognize] that that same light can interact with us at other times during our lives,”

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says Melvin Morse, MD, pediatrician and author of *Final Visions*. Because our culture rarely allows for the idea of heaven and earth intersecting, Morse claims that this is “in many ways . . . a harder concept to accept than life after death.”

And yet St. Paul referred to that great “cloud of witnesses” who, now in heaven, stand ready to help and reassure us as we complete our earthly mission. Why would God not occasionally permit us to be touched by them?

### **Dreams and Visions**

Our Father has always reached his people in this way; at least seventy passages or events in the Bible refer to dreams and visions, promised by God as early as the days of Moses. “Should there be a prophet among you, in visions will I reveal myself to him, in dreams will I speak to him” (Numbers 12:6). Those skilled in interpreting dreams and visions were revered, and church fathers paid serious attention to them. However, as faith became more ritualized, many leaders relegated dreams and visions to the world of superstition.

But “so far we haven’t found anything in nature that doesn’t have its function,” wrote John Sanford in *Dreams: God’s Forgotten Language*. “So why should we say that of all created things, the dream alone makes no sense?” Since dreams are not necessarily

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limited by time and space or barriers that humankind deliberately erects, Sanford points out, it's a natural way for God to reach us.

Visions are another way. Who can overlook the dramatic increase in reported apparitions of Mary, the Mother of Jesus (almost two hundred reputed new sightings just in the past few years), and related phenomena, such as weeping or moving statues, spinning suns, and other occurrences? And “Catholics aren’t the only seers,” noted Robert Ellwood, professor of comparative religion at the University of Southern California, in the *Los Angeles Times* (July 13, 1994). “Protestants have visions of angels or Jesus, Hindus have visions of Krishna.” Since 1990, reports of similar happenings have come from Iraq, Syria, Israel, Korea, India, and Lebanon; accounts of apparitions involving former Muslims have surfaced in Kenya, while in Nepal, large numbers of Hindus reported seeing the image of a crucified man in the sky. A Greek Orthodox church in Chicago, typical of many such sites, contains a painting that shed tears for seven months in 1986, and attracted over four million visitors, including scientists and representatives from the Smithsonian Institute. Witnesses to the occurrence reported many physical and emotional healings.

Although a number of these happenings are ultimately found to be fraudulent or explainable by natural means—and church leaders maintain a healthy skepticism about most others—it’s obvious that

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the sheer number of such reports is increasing. Why? Messages (when provided) are remarkably similar: God is urging repentance, pouring out his mercy on the entire world, and calling his children to his side. It's not the phenomenon itself that is important, say experts, but what it means and where it leads.

### **Changes in Nature**

Six of the ten costliest disasters in U.S. history have occurred since 1989 (four since 1992), including the Los Angeles earthquake, the 1993 Mississippi River floods, which inundated an area the size of Switzerland, and three years ago, Hurricane Katrina, which left thousands of people homeless. An estimated 1,167 tornadoes were reported in the U.S. in 1993; 1995 was the most active East Coast hurricane season in more than forty years. In early 1996, several areas of the country endured record snowfalls and floods. Droughts seem to be increasing in both number and intensity. Has this all some spiritual significance? Are such phenomena fulfilling prophecies from earlier times?

We know that a loving Father would not deliberately *send* such devastation, any more than human parents would intentionally inflict pain on their offspring. But wise adults do permit children to experience the consequences of their behavior, as learning tools. Might

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God now be simply lifting the protective hand that he has long held over us, as a demonstration of what *could* happen if we continue to ignore him? “When mankind rejects God, it is also rejecting the force that binds the universe and keeps everything from chaos,” believes author Michael Brown. “But as at Sodom and Gomorrah, God’s warnings are almost always conditional. They describe what will happen *if* present circumstances persist.”

It is easy to see the negative side of nature out of control. But consider an interesting aspect: in many recent disasters there has been destruction to *property*, but a less-than-expected death and injury toll. One homeowner, surveying the smoldering remains of the Oakland, California, fires, summed it up: “I suddenly realized that everything that *man* had made was gone. Yet everything that God had made—our faith, our spirit, the love and support all around us, even the little flowers bravely pushing through the ashes—all this was still here.” For this man, the fire had become a blessing that forced him to reevaluate his life and his priorities.

On other occasions, people have treated approaching storms or floods as faith builders, by praying fervently that God put a ring of protection around their home or farm. Stories abound of hurricanes suddenly changing course or crops remaining safe despite freezing temperatures. Coincidences? Perhaps. Or perhaps these, too, are just part of the wonders God is showing us today.

## **The Power of Prayer**

Years ago we might have assumed that miracles were possible but granted only at distant shrines or through an anointed few, surely not for ordinary folks like us. Today we are learning that such a philosophy is too limited. “I was ready to respond to those who asked me not,” God reminds us in the book of Isaiah (65:1). “I said: ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that did not call upon my name.” Our Father wants us to ask, even boldly, for what we need, because asking is a sign that we understand our relationship with him.

Over one hundred scientific experiments have already been done on this theme, showing that prayer does bring about significant changes, especially when used in physical and emotional healings. “If the technique being studied had been a new drug or a surgical procedure instead of prayer, it would have been heralded as some sort of breakthrough,” notes Dr. Larry Dossey, author of *Healing Words*.

“My sense is that the healing phenomenon is the next phase of Jewish spirituality,” adds Rabbi Michael Swartz, executive director of Camp Ramah, a Jewish healing center in Palmer, Massachusetts. “It involves people who are seeking and looking for ways to connect to God.”

That’s why today people routinely pray over those who are ill, asking God for multiplication miracles, including taking command over nature. Why membership in praise communities, prayer groups,

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and other more active and dynamic forms of worship is growing. Why some children—in many cultures, considered to have a special link with the sacred—seem to have spiritual wisdom beyond their years, just as the Book of Joel predicted. Why miracles seem to be happening more frequently than ever before.

And that's why people of many ages and faiths have been willing to share their own glimpses of heaven on the following pages.\* Although some of these events happened years ago, the majority are recent occurrences, offering reassuring evidence that God has not abandoned his people. Instead, he continues to call us—with little signs or awesome wonders—every day of our lives.

\*Note: An asterisk (\*) after a name indicates the name has been changed.