

IV. - The miracle.

Praised be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone performs miracles.

Psalm 72:18.

ERST when you seriously contemplate the painful struggle in which man, weakened by sin, found himself engaged with nature, strengthened by the curse, you can understand the significance of the miracle. Without the miracle, Nature soon gave the impression of being more powerful, more superior and higher than the spirit, something that naturally led to fearful, idolatrous worship of Nature. Nature imperceptibly took the place in the estimation of the trembling man, which was reserved for the living God, and it was entirely indifferent to this whether the fear hit the heart because of what nature itself had done to one, or whether one looked for the workings of evil spirits behind it. What frightened me was not Nature at rest, but Nature in action, and in principle it made no difference whether that action arose from Nature itself or was brought about in it by evil spirits. The fearful question remained: "How can we escape the supremacy of Nature when it is in operation? Image here was the great sea. Magnificent to gaze upon from the beach or to sail in fragile hulk, as long as its waters are at rest, but to threaten the helpless with death and destruction, when its waves are thrust up high and crash onto the beach. Silent Nature refreshed, appealed to and was beneficent, but Nature in action, when the elements were in turmoil, provoked terror and dismay. Against this fearful terror man found no help in himself; it seemed as if his God, like him, was inferior to Nature. This led from the worship of his God to the worship of Nature in its power and dismay, or, animistically, to fear of the spirits that wickedly conjured up Nature. And that fear was not of Nature or of evil spirits, but of God, could only hold sway or return if the miracle intervened and God demonstrated before the eyes of mankind his supremacy over the power of Nature. - Only in this light is both the indispensability and the high significance of the miracle expressed. Outside this connection with sin and curse the miracle cannot be understood. And it may safely be said that the refusal to believe in the miracle always had its basis in the fact that people did not understand or did not want to understand the highly sacred meaning of the miracle.

Man, desecrated by sin, was left weakened in the face of Nature's power, both in body and in soul. It was not as if his physical strength suddenly diminished, but gradually and gradually it did. Just look at his life span. At first a life span of centuries, up to almost ten centuries, but that life span is already descending and

sinking, until in the days of the Patriarchs it almost equals our short life span, and with Moses in his song it already

Moses in his song, it came down to 70 and 80 years. Illness in all its forms crept in. In the successive series of generations, fatal illness and also poison of all kinds undermined the resistance that life could offer. And among many peoples you will find the recollection of a much stronger, much more powerful ancestry, of Nimrods and Herculeses, of giants and Enaks children, whose descendants were only the degenerate and sunken aftermath. And still more serious nature carried the weakening to the soul. Instead of all together throwing themselves at Nature, one man throws themselves at another. Cain beats Abel to death. Murder is rampant among the children of man. Conscience is stained, and stained conscience kills courage. The high feeling, the proud consciousness of standing as a human being high above Nature, sinks in. Fear replaces courage. Fear diminishes the inner resilience of the soul. He who is tortured by fear, loses his strength of mind. And so, it was perfectly natural that mankind gradually felt weaker and weaker, more and more powerless in the face of Nature, which controls all life and threatens all life.

And that weakened man now stood opposite a Nature that was strengthened in power. It is extremely difficult to form a correct image of the curse that came upon the earth. You may succeed best if you think of Nature as having been driven insane by the curse. It is well known how insanity sometimes miraculously increases the physical power of the unfortunate. In order to master one insane person, sometimes three strong men were not enough. Sometimes the same thing happens to a drunkard. During riots or fights it is not uncommon for ferocious people to get drunk beforehand in order to be more reckless, more courageous, and even overpowering a drunken brute sometimes requires extraordinary effort. But with the insane the increase in strength is sometimes much stronger. Not usually happy, but far from rare, the rage of insanity lends its victim a muscular strength that far exceeds the normal measure of human strength. In such an insane savage a complete transformation of his nature takes place. The same person, who at first was calm and quiet and filled with tenderness for his own, suddenly attacks his wife and children, assaults his father and mother, wants to violate and kill them. His whole mood, his whole expression, the whole expression of his being has changed. As a destructive force he acts towards his entire environment, and whoever grabs hold of him or wants to tame him, suffers the fury of his miraculously increased power.

It is in such an image that Nature appears after the curse has set in. As with a madman, she has times of calm and quiet, but these are followed by times of wildness and fury, when the elements rush in and destruction threatens from all sides. Then the earth shakes, the hurricanes begin to roar, the storm winds stir up the waters, the rivers burst their banks, and it seems as if everything is going down. And as with the madman, so with Nature the whole being is changed by the curse. Toxic became what was once beneficial. The plant shows thorns and thistles. In the animals there is wildness and tearing. Anger and pestilence emanate. The whole of Nature forms one coherent organic whole, and in the very essence of that whole corruption has crept into all its realms and spheres. Destruction penetrates her to her marrow, and from that marrow the poison of destruction spreads through all her members. And, in actuality, she acts like a madwoman towards mankind. And where that same Nature in paradise embraced the first man with affectionate love, it seems as if, seized by the curse, she throws herself upon the man of her former love, to tease him, to torment him, to do violence to him and to destroy him; and she has become so much stronger, so much more powerful. From the plant kingdom with poison and thorns, from the animal kingdom with claws and maws, from the spheres with tempests and stormy winds, from the depths with fire-breathing and earth trembling, she prepares herself against him. She presents herself as one raging colossus who wants to throw mankind down with all her might. In that rage her strength is tenfold. It is as if she howls and roars to frighten mankind. And by that fear, that dismay overcome, the weakened man shrinks, crawls away and withdraws like the snail in his shell, trembling and shuddering with fear.

Fear has become religion. The word "fear" bothers us if we want to express in it our tender and deep feeling of love for our God. Ours is the religion which inspires in us a Spirit, "not again to fear", but an emotion which makes us whisper, whisper, in holy adoration: Abba, dear Father! But look at the books of the Old Covenant, look at the patriarchs and Moses, at the psalmist and prophet, and it is always the fear of God that comes to the fore; it is and remains the first, the predominant form in which Godliness is expressed. Even in the last book of the prophets, in Malachi, the Lord asks: "Am I a Lord, where is my fear? And this could not be more different. We, in our present lives, can no longer imagine the fear and the anxiety, in which mankind has been after the fall amidst Nature poisoned by the curse. Dependence is far too weak a word to express the fearful realization to which the then human race was prey when faced with Nature in its unbounded power,

unrestrained by anything. It was fear, it was anxiety, it was fear of death, it was dismay, it was fear, fear in the full sense of the word, which gripped the spirit of man. Whoever, in the midst of this fear, went wild and fell away from his God, began as a matter of course to see in that overpowering nature the highest, the all-powerful, and so out of this fear arose the service of nature, or the service of the evil spirits, which were thought to misuse nature in order to threaten mankind with destruction. And vice versa, where faith persisted and one did not let go of the conviction that our God was even more powerful than Nature and that she served Him as an instrument, there man transferred his fear to his God, and the fear of God became the very essence of religion. A word, an expression, which we can still keep and use, but whose meaning has completely changed for us. The word devout, the word fruit of God still means someone who fears God, just think of the German word *Furcht* for fear; thus, devotion to God is literally still fear of God. But for us, the idea of fear and anxiety, of dismay, has completely disappeared from this. To fear God and not man has become the antithesis for us, and now it implies nothing more than a silent reverence for our God and His holy ordinances, to submit to Him as His creature.

But it was precisely here that the need for the miracle arose.

It arose from the contrast between the weak human being and Nature, which had become wild and therefore had increased in strength and destructive power. God was not seen. He was the Unseen One. But always they had that awful Nature around them, in front of them, behind them, and over them. The impression made by Nature was therefore so overwhelming and crushed man's spirit. Who could stand up to Nature? Who could stand against it? Who could conquer and control it? Oh, it is so, one still believed. The Creator of the heavens and the earth had to be more powerful, and sometimes, in the way of ordinary means, there was a decree from Him for salvation. But still the question: Is God, our God, really too strong in nature, the master of nature? was irresistibly raised again and again. And if one then begged and prayed, afflicted and sacrificed, and Nature still prevailed, then finally one's faith sank in. No, not God, Nature was the supreme one. And this frightened, from all belief, awareness could only be broken by the miracle. If God performed miracles and signs, which made his supremacy over nature shine before all eyes, then yes, but only then, did fear of Nature subside, and did God become a refuge and a rock, a high room for His own. Revelation, through participation, through speech preceded this. The fear of Nature, which caused doubts about God's supremacy, was even to raise doubts about the existence of God. The Unseen One

was not seen. Was He there? Where to discover Him? How to find Him? And now Revelation came to the rescue. Right from the start in paradise. God does not show Himself, no, He reveals Himself. He speaks into the soul and to mankind. Later He gives promises, and those promises are fulfilled. He announces the judgment in the flood and the flood comes. He deals with the patriarchs as a man deals with his friend. In the circle in which Revelation makes itself felt, the belief in God's existence persists. But this circle was small. There are very few who are thus gifted. Among the nations, belief in God is declining. Almost all of them are falling back into nature worship or spirit worship. And now the people must be called, the people must be formed, in whom faith in God will become the foundation of all the people's existence. To this end, the descendants of the patriarchs went into the crucible of Egypt. And when, therein forged into one nation, they are called to go out of Egypt and enter Canaan, and thus become the people of the Lord, the miracle occurs in a grand scale, in an overwhelming manner, precisely here, and that miracle will remain for all ages, in all memory, the foundation of Israel's faith and hope.

First come the miracles before Pharaoh's eye in his palace; then the miracles of judgment upon him and his people; and finally, the mighty miracle when Israel crosses the Red Sea dry-footed. The aim here is clearly to gain power. It is a demonstration of power to inspire awe in Egypt and its Pharaohs, and a demonstration of power to rescue Israel and bind it to the faith of its father God. Here, too, Revelation precedes Moses. Deeply and powerfully the impression of God's holy existence must be impressed upon Moses. And now comes the competition with the wise men of Egypt. Note also this. There is no doubt that antiquity had been handed down a knowledge, an instinctive knowledge of Nature, and that secrets were known which at that time still left man with a certain power over Nature. Frivolous mockery may well explain all that as imagination. But Scripture teaches us otherwise. The wise men in Egypt, it tells us, actually did things which we could not imitate, and which can only be explained by a certain mysterious, instinctive knowledge of the power over Nature which has since been lost. But as readily as we acknowledge this, it is equally certain that all manner of deception and misrepresentation had gradually crept in beneath this, and that the wise men of Egypt presented as magic what was in fact no more than the product of traditional knowledge of nature. And although this mysterious knowledge had served the people of Pharaoh well for a time, and had raised them to a higher level of culture through the efforts of the priests and wise men of Egypt, this had now

come to an end, and that is why Moses and Aaron now appear before them, in order to present them with an entirely different power, namely the winning power of God, in a form which may seem strange to us, but which had to appear in precisely this way in order to demonstrate the mysteries of Egypt in their vanity. This first cycle of miracles runs counter to the mystery that was still blooming in Egypt.

But then things become more serious and the miracles of judgment come. Medium-sized miracles, if you will, because they are mostly natural forces used to execute God's judgment on Pharaoh's pride. The Nile was the Egyptians' fame and idol. And now the Nile itself becomes the instrument of the Lord to smite Egypt's pride. And then come the plagues, which arise from the wilderness, and are all to be explained by increased natural effects; but so increased, and so employed, that even the Egyptian guesses a higher power in them, though, when the first fear has passed, he sinks back again and again into unbelief. Until it comes to the firstborn and later Israel crosses the Red Sea, and now all the people see the power of the Lord over all the forces of nature, and Miriam bursts into jubilation with her choirs, and Moses cries out: "O Lord, who is like You among the gods? Who is like Thee, glorified in holiness, fearful in songs of praise, doing wonders?". One must read the neat work of Dr. Wright, a thoroughly knowledgeable geologist, to understand all the significance of that mighty miracle. He is the author of: "The Ice Period in America and its Significance to Human Life;" of: "The ice fields in Greenland and the North Atlantic" of: "Asiatic Russia" etc., works which for their scientific character are appreciated by all. Now he gave from his work: "Scientific Confirmation of the History of the Old Testament" (Oberlin Ohio 1906.) On pages 83-115 herein he discusses as a geologist and paleontologist the exodus from Egypt, and makes us feel its significance for the first time. And nothing stands out more than that it is this majestic miracle, placed at the beginning of Israel's history, that once and for all has laid the foundation of all Israel's religion on the supremacy of Jehovah over Nature and its power. It is to this that godliness in Israel altogether returns. From this fact she always derives strength again. Jehovah, a God who works miracles, is the cry that precedes their entry into Canaan. The fear of that power of Israel's God had fallen upon all the inhabitants of Canaan. It is this miracle power of the Lord that unseated these peoples, and it is also this miracle power and its after-effects on the minds, through which Israel has prevailed in Canaan.

The miracle has thus saved our human race's faith in the living God. The miracle is not secondary in the history of religion. It is not a part of history. Something one can also imagine doing away with. Rather, the miracle comes first, from the miracle comes the revival and the confirmation of faith, and the fact that after so many centuries we can and may believe in the living God, is due to the entrance of the miracle in Israel's beginning and in Israel's history. And it is not possible to fathom this entirely unique significance of the miracle, unless you go back to God's decree to man that he must subdue all of Nature and all of the earth to himself. Through sin and in the fall the crown of honour fell from man's head. Standing powerless and helpless before the unleashed fury of Nature, he was left with only this question: whether the God whom he worshipped, like himself, succumbed to that wild power of Nature, or whether, where he succumbed, his God remained lord and master over Nature, and could cover and protect him against that wild power of Nature. And now this could not be shown except by the miracle. It had to become apparent and public that a power even higher than Nature's could reveal itself in Nature, work in it, exorcise it, and make it subservient to a higher purpose. Revelation, speech, and participation in the soul were not enough. It came down to power. On demonstration of power, of superiority, and of supremacy over the terrible powers of Nature, against which the weakened man found himself placed. And it was precisely this that the miracle, and particularly the miracle at the birth of Israel as a people, brought to us. And that is why our Reformed fathers did not make the Old Covenant, only to strengthen themselves spiritually in the New Covenant. No, they went back to Israel and its emergence as a people, to honor the mighty revelation of the miracle in the birth of Israel. They understood that the miracle, for which there would have been no room in Paradise, could not fail to come, but had to come, and did come, when the tradition of Paradise had worked itself out, and the new life of faith had to be awakened in Israel, in order that one day all the nations of the earth might be blessed through Israel.