

CHAPTER 1

JUST ASK: A WORLD OF MIRACLES AWAITS

Expect a new miracle every day.

—Oral Roberts

When I was a kid, growing up on a farm in Kansas, my younger brother, Mark, and I loved to swim in our pond out in the pasture. We would jump and dive off the dock into the deep, cold water, swim back, and climb up the old aluminum ladder that we had stuck in the mud and leaned against the rickety pier. We had truck and tractor inner tubes we floated on and a canoe we would paddle around in.

When I turned twelve, I think it was, I got a new waterproof digital watch for my birthday. One hot summer afternoon not long after that, Mark pushed an inner tube out away from the dock for me to dive through. As I dived through the tube, the valve stem caught my watch and ripped it off my wrist. My heart sank; I swam back to the dock and told Mark what had happened. I then started diving to the bottom of the pond, which was more than eight feet deep at the end of the dock, running my hands through the mud, trying to find that watch.

After diving several times with no luck, I was exhausted, frustrated, and ready to give up and go back to the house. Mark, being a good little Pentecostal boy, suggested that we pray. I didn't feel like it, but being a good Pentecostal big brother, I agreed. Mark prayed a very simple prayer: "Dear God, please help us find Paul's

watch. In the name of Jesus, amen.” He raised up his little head and looked me right in the face, grinning, with his eyes sparkling as if it were Christmas morning. He suggested that he swim back out with the inner tube and put it in the exact same spot for me to dive through again. Doubting that this would work or that we’d ever find the watch, I nevertheless directed him from the dock—a bit farther out, a bit to the right—until he had placed the inner tube perfectly. I backed up, ran down the dock, dived through the inner tube, and then swam to the bottom of the pond with my eyes squeezed shut and my hands spread wide open until they hit the cold squishy mud. My right palm landed directly on my watch; I didn’t even have to move my hand around to find it. I grasped it tightly and swam back to the surface, hardly believing what had just happened. Mark and I ran back to the house and talked all over each other telling our mom.

That story has become a little legend in our family. But legend though it may be, it’s not an odd or unbelievable event in the lives of Pentecostals. Like Mark, most Pentecostals expect things like this to happen and love to tell stories about the miracles and healings. Just this past Christmas, I told the tale of my lost-and-found watch to my in-laws in Texas while we were all sitting around the dinner table eating stew and cornbread. Ronda, my sister-in-law, immediately said, “Remember the bone spur on my knee that disappeared?” and Betty, my mother-in-law, interjected, “And don’t forget the burns on Deborah’s leg that were healed.” Grandma then told about the time that Grandpa laid his hands on their van and prayed for it one morning—which was the morning they were almost killed by an out-of-control eighteen-wheeler “with smoke boiling everywhere” that “screeched within two feet of the back of our van.” When asked why he had prayed that morning, Grandpa replied, “I just felt impressed to do it. Never done it before and never done it since.” Betty then told us about when her uncle had a spider bite so bad that he swelled up and was going to die. There was no doctor, so his father prayed for the boy, who was healed immediately.

Everybody chimed in with one story after another until Grandpa interrupted, "I'm going to tell one even more impressive than that," and went on to recount an amazing tale about when Sister Foster had called him to come quickly because Gladys, with the death rattle in her throat, had been sent home to die by the doctors. Her husband, whom Grandpa called "a big ol' Methodist," was standing by the door "to see what we were going to do to his wife." Grandma and Grandpa prayed for her, and a couple of days later, she was perfectly fine and lived for many years after that.

Grandpa then told about how, when he was stricken with appendicitis as a twelve-year-old boy, he looked at a clock on the wall and thought, "The man who made that clock could fix it if it broke. And God could fix me, too." The pain left him that very instant, and he just swung his feet off the bed and got up and strolled out onto the porch. His father walked up from fetching the doctor, leaned against a post, and, said Grandpa, "his eyes got yay big, and he said, 'Son, what's happened to you?' I told him about the clock and how the pain left me. He expected me to get sicker and sicker; he just knew I was going to die. But I was playing with the other boys from then on, and I've never had another pain on that side."

Over the next hour, almost everyone at the table told at least one story. We heard tales of healings and miracles that included asthma cured, a cancer that fell off a man's hand, infected tonsils being spit out on the ground by a boy after he was prayed for, and the woman whose infected bladder healed ("She still writes to us fifty-five years later," Grandma said with a nod of her head). There was the woman in Anniston, Alabama, who had emphysema; Brother Cobb in Bonham, Texas, who also had emphysema (and who slept in a bed for the first time in fifteen years after being prayed for and healed); the woman with unceasing pain that had lasted for years (who heard a radio preacher say, "Go to the nearest Assembly of God church and get the pastor to pray for you"); the two-year-old girl who didn't

pray quite right (“Thank you Jesus *for* mommy’s headache”) but her mother’s headache was healed anyway; and even a healing from “we don’t know what it was.”

During a pause in our merry recounting of miracle upon miracle, I mentioned that in my book I would also need to address the fact that sometimes people aren’t healed, that sometimes miracles don’t happen when we pray. At my words, silence fell; I could hear the clock ticking in the living room. I took a bite of my stew, put some butter on another piece of cornbread, and drank some sweet tea. Then Grandpa broke the silence by telling about the man who had “walking pneumonia” and couldn’t eat onions, but after Grandpa prayed for him, he ate steak sautéed with onions and was fine from then on. Betty told about how Rodney, her husband, who was a technician at an Exxon gas plant, was healed of plantar warts and his feet ended up as smooth as a baby’s bottom. There followed more stories—about how prayer healed the boy who sucked down a peanut whole, shell and all, and doctors thought he’d die; the boy who was sweating with a terrible fever in bed (probably from polio) and was perfectly well the next day; and the junior high girls who made it safely home from basketball practice in the middle of a tornado-filled hailstorm: “Suddenly there was a clearing around them. They drove home safely with the storm all around, but their car area was clear. They got inside safely. It built the girls’ faith incredibly.” Those girls personally experienced a miracle like all the ones we’d been recounting, and in the future, when the need arose, they’d be able to have even more confidence when they prayed.

When I told the story about finding my watch, I did not expect that it would generate a slew of miracle stories. But I should have, because the four generations of people sitting around that table really believe these things happen—and happen regularly if we pray with enough faith that God can do them. Not only have they heard hundreds of stories like these, but they’ve seen some of them first hand. And the silent response to my question about the lack of healings is as revealing

as the healing stories themselves: Pentecostals tend not to tell about the times their prayers go unanswered and miracles don't happen. They often do just what Grandpa did—fill the silence with more inspiring miracle stories.

My little experience that winter afternoon is not unique; more than half a billion other Pentecostals in the world expect the same kind of amazing miracles when they ask God to help them. They live in a world where God is close enough to talk to, friendly enough to care about warts, and powerful enough to keep an eighteen-wheeler from crushing your van.

It is not my intention here to defend or prove that these stories and events are true. The people who experience these miracles believe that they happen. I know there are many questions about a God who does things like this, and I know that many other explanations can be given as to why these things happened (if they happened at all). For instance, if God can heal, why would God not just heal everybody, or at least a lot more people? It makes no sense to heal a few children miraculously but let thousands of others die. Or perhaps the healings are not by God but are the results of wish fulfillment or the placebo effect. Some theorists have even suggested that humans have the ability to release energy that can heal themselves and even others sometimes, but it's not God's doing; it's just a phenomenon that's not yet understood. But in the Pentecostal world, healings and miracles are normal, everyday events, and they're attributed to God. Pentecostals look at it this way: if it happens sometimes, why question it? Keep praying and believing, and your miracle may come.

Jesus and His Followers Healed People— It's in the Bible!

So where do Pentecostals get the idea that God responds in miraculous ways when people pray? The answer is simple: it's in the Bible. It tells of more than forty miracles and healings that Jesus did, and one biblical author even had the audacity to

add that “the whole world could not contain the books if all his works were written down in detail.”¹ Jesus restored a blind man’s sight, raised a dead little girl back to life, calmed a storm while in a boat on a lake, straightened crippled limbs, cured skin diseases, and turned water into wine. People like Pentecostals, who read the Bible in a straightforward way and take it as gospel, are impressed by these miracles and healings. But what of those who object that just because Jesus worked miracles, does that mean that people today should think they could do the same? Pentecostalism has a response for them.

Pentecostals believe that Jesus was telling the truth when he said, “I assure you that if anyone believes in me, they will be able to do the same things that I do; and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going back to the Father.”² They believe that after Jesus came back to life following his execution, he empowered all of his followers to pray, heal, and trust God for miracles, just as Jesus himself had done. In fact, the amazing stories start immediately after Pentecost—that’s the day Jesus filled his friends with the Holy Spirit so they could live like him and tell people about him and help them live as Jesus did. Peter healed a crippled man on the steps of the temple within a month of Jesus’ being gone, others “performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people,” and Paul raised a dead boy back to life. James wrote that “if you are sick, ask the mature believers to come and pray for you. Ask them to put olive oil on you in the name of the Lord. Prayers offered in faith will make sick people well. The Lord will heal them, and if they have sinned, he will forgive them.”³ These are not just a few random stories and instructions thrown together to make a case; Pentecostals believe that the miraculous was a regular and expected part of what God was doing through his people in the early years of Christianity and that God still wants Christians to live this same way.

Pentecostals have been severely criticized since the beginning of the movement for believing in modern-day healings and

miracles. Some Christians argue that miracles were just for the first century, the first few generations of Christianity, the Bible days. They say that such things died out hundreds of years ago and that God doesn't work that way anymore. But Pentecostals believe they have both the Bible and experience on their side; how else could they keep doing what others say can't be done? They really believe that everything that happened in the Bible can happen now, that all Christians everywhere in the world are supposed to be a continuation of the Bible days and can look to God for miracles. If asked, a Pentecostal would say that right now anyone, including you, can ask God to heal you . . . and it might just happen.

Praying with Faith: How It Works

Pentecostals have many ways of reasoning about how praying with faith works. I've heard that "faith is stepping out on nothing and landing on something." Like the little boy in *The Polar Express* who had to believe *before* he could see Santa Claus, Pentecostals trust that they're going to be OK even when all the evidence appears to weigh against them. You have to *believe* that it is possible. The Gospel according to Mark reports that Jesus said, "And these signs will accompany those who believe, in my name they will . . . place their hands on sick people and they will get well."⁴ Only by truly believing can miraculous things happen; it's kind of like working with God, receiving what God really wants for us. Believing is agreeing with God. The Assemblies of God (with over forty million members worldwide) says it this way: "We take these Scriptures at face value and openly practice them in our church. We don't claim to be successful 100 percent of the time, but we persist in asking God to show his love and concern in tangible ways when the human body is suffering. And he does."⁵ Pentecostals also place great significance on Jesus' saying that "in my name" miracles will happen. They pray "in the name of Jesus" and believe it is the

most powerful name in the world, claiming that prayers prayed specifically in the name of Jesus are much more effective than any other prayers.

Some Pentecostal theologians and pastors have critiqued the stereotypical “name it and claim it” and “blab it and grab it” approach to healings and miracles. These are pejorative references to the teaching that Christians can simply name and claim the objects of their desire—physical healing, a new car, a watch at the bottom of the pond—and if they have enough faith, they will receive them. Detractors say that these kinds of Pentecostals just seem to be blabbing with their mouth and grabbing with their hands. They argue that the miraculous most often happens on the boundary between believers and unbelievers, because healings are supposed to be signs that God is real and the gospel is true. Miracles are evidence for the outsider, not therapy or a lottery for the insider. But even in the right context, the people praying are supposed to believe that God can heal; some even say you’re supposed to believe that God will do the healing right then and there. Pentecostals tend to emphasize the human side of the equation, since God’s ability is rarely questioned.

The witness of Pentecostals all around the world to miraculous events is understood to enhance people’s ability to believe. When Fidel Castro reportedly sent a spy to investigate an underground Pentecostal church in Cuba, the pastor was preaching on healing, and many people were being healed. In the story, the spy arrived with a rotten and infected tooth and left with a new tooth and no pain. The church was never bothered again. Daniel Ekechukwu, a pastor in Nigeria who was supposedly killed in a car wreck and taken to the mortuary, where he lay for two days, was allegedly raised from the dead in 2001. The video chronicling the miracle includes interviews with the doctor and the mortician.⁶ One of the reasons Pentecostals tell stories of miraculous events is that they know that healing works better and people have more faith when they see or hear about other things that God has done.

Faith also works better when it is exercised often and by as many people as possible. Pentecostals pray for healings and miracles for themselves and for others all the time. Prayer is certainly not limited to Sunday morning church services or to prayers by the pastor. There are prayer chains, prayer Web sites and e-mail lists, altar calls, spontaneous prayers, prayers on the phone, prayer requests, and “anointing with oil.”

Prayer chains are networks of people who agree to call others when they receive a request or hear of an emergency. Before the days of e-mail and text messaging, the first person would telephone five people, and each of them would call five, who would call five, so that as many as fifty-six people could be praying about a problem within thirty minutes. When my mom got a call, we started praying while she made the rest of the calls. She kept the conversations short so she could move on down her list quickly, because the more people “bombarding heaven’s gates,” the greater the chances that the answer would come.

Spontaneous prayers may happen during the middle of a conversation anywhere—on a sidewalk or in a restaurant or any other place—if the person you’re talking to suggests praying for something you’re talking about. As for anointing oil, the use and type varies widely, but many Pentecostals take any ordinary cooking oil and gently dab it first on their fingers and then on the forehead of the person they’re praying for. I’ve even heard about a man who used motor oil in an emergency because he didn’t have his regular anointing oil. Praying with faith in the name of Jesus, believing thoroughly and without doubt that God can heal, and anointing with oil—these all work together to help produce the needed miracle.

But Does It Make Sense?

Our son was born a week late and weighed almost nine pounds. We were thrilled and excited, and so was our entire family. My parents (Pentecostals from Kansas), my wife Deborah’s parents

(Pentecostals from Texas), grandparents, siblings, nieces, and cousins (all Pentecostals) crowded into the hospital room for the announcement of his name: Nathan Bird Alexander, after my middle name and Deborah's maiden name. Everyone was smiling and laughing, some even crying with joy, and celebrating. We had been married almost seven years, we had already been through one miscarriage, and everybody was eager for us to have a baby!

But a couple of hours later, Nathan began breathing much too rapidly; he was admitted immediately to the special care unit. He had some kind of serious virus or infection; we could not snuggle or sleep with him at all that first night, since he was under an oxygen dome. Deborah's blood pressure went way up because she was not holding her baby or able to nurse, and by the second day, we were aware that he might not recover. Of course, our family was praying for Nathan, but I was not. I couldn't.

I had recently finished my coursework for a Ph.D. in theology, and that can be a painful and disconcerting experience for a Pentecostal. I had also become more aware of the depth of suffering in the world, and much of the Christianity I had grown up with made little or no sense to me anymore. How, I wondered, could I ask God to heal my son when hundreds of thousands, even millions of children around the world were starving, abused, suffering with disease, and dying every day? It was not fair. If God cared for this world half as much as my wife does or loved this world as much as the Bible says he does, he wouldn't make us jump through hoops of faith-filled, word-specific "in the name of Jesus" prayer in order for him to heal people. The whole world needs healing. I want it to be healed and would do so, if I had the power, without making anyone ask in just the right way. Isn't God also that kind? That merciful? That gracious? That realistic?

I had concluded that the completely messed-up nature of the world could not be reconciled with the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God. If God is all-powerful (he can do anything), then he *can* heal; if he is all-loving (he wants the best

for everybody), he *will* heal; yet all are *not* healed. Therefore, I reasoned, God is either not all-powerful or not all-loving, or there is no God. A powerful but unloving God would not mind that so many people in the world are suffering—I couldn't buy that. A loving God without so much power is more believable given the fact that the world is in such bad shape. God cares immensely but can't fix everything.

So as a Pentecostal who had struggled immensely with the reality of pain in the world (even though not so much in my personal life), at this moment of great need in my family I could no longer pray for healing. For if God can heal and do miracles but does so only based on human prayers, I felt I could no longer respect or worship such an arbitrary and finicky being; a loving God would not play games with people who are in the depths of despair and suffering. I had quit believing that God heals at all. It was either that or return to atheism.

Pentecostals have answers to questions and frustrations like mine. "Trust in God's wisdom," they say, or "You need to have more faith," or "It's not God's timing." Each of these answers helps Pentecostals make sense of their world.

But telling a woman with multiple sclerosis that she would be healed if she would get the sin out of her life could very well drive her away (as it did a friend of mine). Another friend, raised Pentecostal, had severe arthritis that kept him in a wheelchair most of the time. He eventually had to leave Pentecostalism because he got tired of being told he needed more faith in order to be healed.

The problem with believing in miracles and healings is that they don't always happen—and when they don't happen, somebody gets blamed. Because healing is seen as a certainty for those with enough faith, it seems there has to be an explanation when prayers don't heal the sick. I blamed God for not just healing everybody, but most Pentecostals won't do that. They trust God and instead often find fault in their own prayers or in the lives of the people who are not healed. Pentecostals are told to work up their faith like they are building their muscles.

But this sometimes sounds like faith in faith, not faith in God. The responsibility falls so heavily on the prayers and faith of the people that failure is taken very personally. After all, Pentecostals believe unquestioningly in God's ability to heal. So if it doesn't happen, it's not God's fault; God can choose not to heal, but many think that if he does not heal, it's because he wasn't asked properly. We can cause God's hand to move if we believe hard enough and say the right words ("in the name of Jesus").

In a way, I've come to think that this kind of Pentecostalism is like a Harry Potter or *Lord of the Rings* type of Christianity. You live in a world where there are demons, spirits, and miraculous happenings within your control. And like the phenomenal global success of the Harry Potter series (with hundreds of millions of copies sold so far), Pentecostalism has drawn millions of followers.

The reason for the appeal of Pentecostalism may lie in the natural, simple human desire to have more control and power over our lives and circumstances. Throughout history we have sought to improve our lives through knowledge, science, education, violence, medicine, religion, and magic. It is exciting to learn about something new that can help us improve ourselves, whether it is a better water pump in Kenya, an antidote for AIDS, a bigger bomb, or a more effective way to pray. Pentecostals believe that all humans can learn how to trust God for miracles, cast out demons, and heal the sick. Many even believe that people can be transported from one place to another instantly. When I was a teenager, I prayed for this to happen to me while driving late one night, exhausted. I didn't want to get into a wreck, and I had heard stories of such transportation happening—people were about out of gas and then suddenly they were fifty miles up the road—so I asked God for it to happen to me. It didn't, but I still believed it was possible, and I made it safely home anyway. (By the way, miraculous transportation happens several times in the Bible,⁷ and it's a normal way of moving around for Harry Potter and his friends.)

When Harry Potter discovered that he was a wizard, not just a Muggle (a nonmagical person), he began a journey of empowerment that enabled him to make the world a better place. He learned how to cast spells and change his environment; things were different because he knew magic. Becoming a Pentecostal is like finding out that you're really a wizard; you really can change the world with supernatural power. And here's the kicker: weird things actually do happen in the real world. Everybody has a worldview by which they explain odd, unnatural, "miraculous" events. The Pentecostal worldview just puts a lot of trust in the unseen and the human ability to ask God for miracles. It's a way of life that sometimes yields remarkable results.

When fervent prayers don't yield the expected results, Pentecostals trust in "God's timing." This approach empowers Pentecostals to pray for the same thing year after year, even when what they pray for doesn't happen. There are many stories about the patience and perseverance of the praying mother who, after decades of prayer, finally saw her miracle. Jesus even tells a story about a persistent widow who keeps bothering a judge with her request for justice "to show his disciples that they should always pray and not give up."⁸

My seasons of unbelief or doubt, like the one I was in when my son was born, don't seem to sway many Pentecostals. They feel sorry for me and wish I believed; they pray for me and trust that I will come back to Pentecostal faith. They disagree with me and see my doubt as hurtful and sad, especially if I won't pray for healing when it is needed. When my newborn son was so ill, they prayed for him when I couldn't, and five days after he was born, we brought him home. And as a new father standing over his crib watching him sleep, counting his breaths to make sure they weren't too fast, I wished that I could pray for him. I really did. But his recovery had not helped me recover my faith; I could explain his health in many other ways. He received good medical care; we found out that he didn't have the worst-feared virus—I did not believe that God had healed him. My son was fine,

and I was more relieved than I could ever put into words, but there were still millions of others suffering around the world, and it still wasn't fair, especially if Nathan was healed because God did it in answer to a few people's fervent prayers. I both did and didn't want there to be a God who heals and does miracles; I couldn't make it make sense.

While I was writing that last paragraph, I got a call from my mother in Kansas. She said, "I need you to help me pray for Dad's safety. He's on his way to Grandma's in the ice and snow with chains on his tires. Pray for Grandma; she just got bit by her cat and it's pretty bad. And pray for all of us, your uncle and aunts too, because she got bit two weeks ago and didn't tell the doctor or any of the rest of us. Help me pray for those three things." That was all. She told me she loved me, said good-bye, and hung up. She had called me to pray to change the world, to actually alter the future, to bring about a different reality because we are talking to the living God who cares about my Dad driving seven miles on roads covered in two inches of solid ice in the dead of winter. She expects him to be safer, Grandma to heal quicker, and the family to deal with this better because I am praying with her. So I did. It's been nine years since my son recovered, and the miraculous still doesn't make rational sense to me. The Bible tells about a sick boy's father who once said to Jesus, "I do believe. Help my unbelief."⁹ I believe, and I don't believe, and I prayed with my mom anyway.

What's the Appeal?

I think there are four simple reasons that the Pentecostal approach to healings and miracles appeals to hundreds of millions of people around the world: almost everyone experiences difficulties, almost everyone needs hope, healing stories are in the Bible, and healing stories abound in contemporary life.

First, almost everybody in the world has at least one problem they'd like to have solved or fixed, whether it is physical,

emotional, financial, relational, or occupational. We get sick, we get depressed, we need money, we fight with our spouses, and our coworkers annoy us. Pentecostalism creates a place where these problems can be presented to God immediately and continually; Pentecostals will pray with you about any problem whatsoever. And if it's physical healing you need, they'll sometimes ask you right after they're done praying, "Do you feel better?" Please don't let my down-home country personal stories mislead you—most Pentecostals, just like most of the rest of the earth's human inhabitants, live in cities. Over the past century, urban dwellers have increased from 14 percent of the world's population to over 50 percent. City people have at least as many problems as their rural cousins. And people who are hurting, even if they're urbanites, can be pleasantly surprised when someone offers to pray for their problem.

The second reason this appeals to so many people is that believing in healing and the miraculous is hopeful. It might actually happen, and as many Pentecostals say, "You'll never know if you don't pray." Poets, philosophers, and world-changers have reflected eloquently on how essential hope is to human survival. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all."¹⁰ When I was in the Middle East, I heard both Israelis and Palestinians encouraging themselves and others to "keep hope alive."

In difficult times, we need a reason to hope. And many Pentecostals think there is good scientific evidence to back up their experience and hope that prayers for healing work. Books like *The Faith Factor: Proof of the Healing Power of Prayer*, coauthored by Dale Matthews, a Yale-, Duke-, and Princeton-educated physician who teaches at Georgetown University, certainly help their case.¹¹ Such books—there are hundreds of them (some more theological than scientific)—argue that prayer has been proved to do such things as send cancer into remission and reverse heart disease. Even while my theological questioning caused me to quit

believing that God healed, and even during my stint as a convinced atheist, I still had to admit that such things as these miraculous healings did occur. I considered them in terms of quantum physics or human energy, something explicable by science, rather than thinking that God in the classical Christian sense played a part, but I regained a hope that healings were real and possible.

So even though there will be differences of opinions among people regarding why these miraculous things happen, Pentecostals have a ready-made worldview that explains the seemingly unexplainable and provides very real hope in apparently impossible situations. In response to a question like “What am I supposed to do, just hope for a miracle?” the answer is “No, you and I are supposed to pray for one and believe that it could happen, because it can.”

The third reason the Pentecostal perspective attracts so many people is that healings happened in the Bible. Quoting the most printed and best-selling book of all time and referencing Jesus himself is a pretty convincing argument for a whole lot of people in the world. The Qur’an also teaches that Jesus healed people, walked on water, and raised the dead. When my wife and I were on our honeymoon in Colorado, we had a Muslim taxi driver, and as a good Pentecostal, I felt I should tell him about Jesus. So thinking that I would get his attention and draw him to Christ, I said, “Do you believe in healing?” He told me that his father was healed of blindness when an imam (a Muslim religious leader) prayed for him. He witnessed to me!

Most religions value holy books, and spirituality is alive and well around the world. Most people believe in the one God, a pantheon of gods, or some kind of spirit or higher power. Pentecostalism affirms that belief in the divine and miraculous and specializes in it. Pentecostals are the ones who take the healing teachings in the Bible seriously and put them into practice, regardless of whether they are African, Asian, or American. There’s an old saying: “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” That unassailable belief in the Bible may explain some of the appeal.

Finally, there is an almost infinite multitude of stories and personal experiences of people who have been healed or have witnessed a miracle. There is safety, and persuasion, in numbers. If accounts of Jesus' works in the New Testament have sold millions of copies, can you imagine how many planets it would take to hold the stories of the accomplishments of his millions of followers? A ten-country survey (of Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, India, the Philippines, South Korea, and the United States) conducted in 2006 found that large majorities of Pentecostals, from 56 percent in South Korea to 87 percent in Kenya, have personally experienced or witnessed the healing of an illness or injury.¹² That translates to about 390 million people who claim to have been healed or to have seen a miracle with their own eyes. Combine this with the fact that Pentecostals tell others about their faith with much greater frequency than other Christians (most do so at least once each week), and we see a powerful force that drives the growth of Pentecostalism. Pentecostal services in India have drawn over one million people at a time, and a Pentecostal church in South Korea has over seven hundred thousand members, making it the largest church in the world of any denomination.¹³ More than half the population of the countries of Guatemala, Brazil, and Kenya are Pentecostals.¹⁴ Pentecostal and charismatic Christians have more television and radio stations and shows than any other group of Christians in the world, and they broadcast their healing and miracle stories far and wide to as many people as possible. But eyewitness testimony from someone you know is the next best thing to seeing it yourself, and Pentecostalism has a lot of friendly eyewitnesses.

Conclusion

When I was eight years old, I woke up on Christmas morning to find that my mom, dad, grandma, and grandpa were gone. My aunt told me they were at the hospital because my mom was sick, so we got dressed and spent all day in the waiting

room. We found out that she had viral meningitis (an infection of the fluid in the spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain), was in traction, and only had days to live. Our family and friends around the world (even my uncle, aunt, and cousins in Africa) prayed for her. Four days later, she walked out of Parkland Hospital in Dallas, Texas, perfectly healed, and she's been fine ever since.

I've told that story many times—that's exactly how it happened. But while writing this chapter, I looked up viral meningitis and found out that "the illness is usually mild and clears up in about a week" and "fatal cases of viral meningitis are rare, and complete recovery is the rule." What? Then I found that *bacterial* meningitis "is very serious. Severe bacterial meningitis can result in brain damage and even death." Now that's more like it; that's exactly what we were told.

So was it a healing or just an incorrect diagnosis? I've always thought, based on the physician's explanation, that my mom recovered from a deadly infection. Our collective memory of the event certainly includes the threat of death as foretold by the doctor, but maybe what mom had was only "rarely" fatal.

It would not affect the faith of my family or of most Pentecostals to find out that it was not a miracle after all; we would simply have seen it as an honest mistake on the doctor's part and would still have no doubt that healings can and still do happen every day. We would just thank God that he spared her from the worst of the two forms of meningitis. With just such optimism and hope Pentecostalism continues to attract increasing numbers of interested observers and expectant converts. For who knows, maybe miracles really do happen.