

Miracles

As we read through the Gospels we note what seems to be a plethora of miracles. Miracles abound as if they were common events. God used miracles to touch the hearts of his fallen creation, to draw their attention away from the everyday painful circumstances and hurtful consequences of living in a fallen world, and to contemplate the power of God in their lives.

What is a miracle? It is an act of God that defies laws of nature. When God created the universe out of nothing, he set in motion certain laws of nature that keep the universe turning in its spheres. These laws of nature keep the planets orbiting around the sun allowing earth to be temperate and habitable, keeps gravity constant, time measurable, seasons in their order, and life somewhat predictable. A miracle is when God defies the laws of nature to validate a divinely ordered event: The red sea parts; the sky rains manna; the Jordan flows backwards; three men can be thrown into a fiery furnace and emerge unscathed. Miracles are dramatic undeniable acts of God that show His authority and power over creation.

Charles Swindoll, in his book *Jesus: the Greatest Life of All*, has this to say about miracles:

"While they appear common in the Bible, miracles are extremely rare in history. God reserves them for brief, remarkable periods of time just prior to his making a major change in how he interacts with His creation. For example, after four hundred years of silence, God astonished the Egyptians and the Hebrews with a series of miraculous events as he prepared His covenant people for the Promised Land."

As God set into motion the events that would lead Israel out of Egypt, he revealed his might and strength through a series of devastating plagues. As Israel made their exodus, God continued to reveal himself to his people through miracles of provision – manna, quail, provision of water, and transformation of bitter water to sweet, life-giving water. Even Israel's entrance into the Promise Land was marked by a miracle – the Jordan stopped flowing so that Israel could cross into the land God was giving them.

During this era God also provided the Mosaic Covenant of the Law to Israel. The Law taught Israel God's expectations regarding a relationship between God and his people, as well as how people are to treat one another. Through the Law, guidelines were set in place defining what it meant to be "God's chosen people" and to have that special relationship with God.

Jesus' ministry is punctuated with miracle after miracle revealing a turning point in God's relationship with his creation – not just Israel, but the world. God in the incarnation of Jesus is ushering in a relationship based on the truth of God's nature: love. While there is a call for righteousness, it is tempered with mercy, compassion and loving-kindness. The Law is not taken out of the equation in man's relationship with

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God, but it is balanced with the mercy and love of God for his creation. Each miracle performed by Jesus reveals the restoration of relationship with God.

Miracles also remedy an “impossible” situation. Miracles restore, renew, and resolve a difficult or unbearable circumstance humans cannot remedy and view as hopeless and impossible. Miracles illustrate that nothing is impossible with God. God can restore strength and use to a crippled limb; he can renew sight to a man born blind; he can bring life to the dead son of a widow ensuring her own security. Miracles do more than restore, renew and resolve, they also reveal identity of the one who performs these miracles. Who but God has the power and authority to restore and heal a fallen world but the one who created it? God’s miracles don’t stop at the immediate need, but work to the good and healing of the “whole person”. Miracles heal the physical; meet the emotional need for love, compassion and understanding; and heal the soul with forgiveness and reassurance of faith.

Signs are miracles that point to Jesus revealing an immediate and universal truth about the nature of the divinity of Jesus. As we study these signs and miracles look for layers of meaning. A sign will reveal a primary and universal truth of who Jesus is in the context of the story. For example, the turning of water into wine will reveal something immediate to the disciples understanding of what Jesus is revealing about himself, namely that he has the creative power and authority to make water into wine. The power of the Creator of the Universe resides in Jesus.

A secondary level of understanding is revealed in context of the gospel reader’s perspective. From the reader’s perspective we will see another layer of meaning building upon that initial revelation. Continuing with the water to wine story, we build on the truth of Jesus having this power and using it. In light of what we know about Jesus final work on the cross (not yet known to the disciples in the story), Jesus’ work is to transform the believer as dramatically and completely as the water became wine. This is getting into our homework a bit, and I don’t want to spoil things for later, so I’ll just leave it at that!

This secondary level of understanding becomes somewhat subjective as our understanding of revealed truth may vary from person to person based upon personal experience, maturity of faith, and level of understanding of who Jesus is. My experiences differ from your experiences and will present a different perspective on that revealed truth. It will apply or shed light on my experiences in a different way than in your life. It does not mean that the Truth itself is different for each person, only the way we understand it and apply it to our own experiences and beliefs is different. Our perspective may allow that truth to be revealed in different ways and levels of meaning. This is why I find studying these passages so fascinating. All of us are familiar with many of these miracles, but I promise you that every time you revisit these stories throughout your life time, you will find a new facet to that gem of truth revealed.

This week in our homework we will be traveling with Jesus as he goes about his ministry restoring physical life and limb, but also revealing the power and love of God who deigns to interrupt fallen creation for its restoration and renewal. By interfering in human events he is showing the characteristic of loving-kindness that dominates his relationship with his creation. In tension with his loving-kindness is his call for righteousness. But we will see that faith leads to healing, overcoming sin and leading to righteousness. We are familiar with

Jesus' saying "Go and sin no more" after healing the hurt and despondent. He does not ask for righteousness first. His powerful compassion is given first and righteousness becomes the response.



Please Read Mark 2:1-12 Healing of the Paralytic

This healing takes place after Jesus had been preaching and healing for sometime throughout Galilee, which would account for the crowd gathered inside and outside the house. Most homes in 1st Century Israel consisted of one to four rooms with a courtyard. Often there was an outdoor staircase leading up to a flat roof made of branches, clay, tiles and/ or sod. It would not have been difficult for a hole to be made in the ceiling.

Verses 1-5 tell us that the friends of the paralytic had brought him to Jesus seeking healing. Jesus forgave the man's sins because of the man's faith. Faith consists of belief in Jesus power and authority to heal. They brought their friend to him because they believed Jesus had the power and authority to heal him. Jesus responded to their faith in a way that brought more than healing to the limbs of the paralytic; and it also provoked a response in those observing the miraculous healing.

The scriptures tell us that the "Teachers of the Law" were quick to criticize. The word usually translated "scribes" is found twenty-one times in Mark and is regularly translated "teachers of the law" by the NIV. They were not copyists but scholars and therefore experts in the interpretation of the law, and the scriptures in general. Their interpretations, which in the time of Jesus existed only in oral form and are therefore called the oral tradition (cf. 7:5-13), constituted a second law, the Pharisaic laws, that came to be as important as the written, or Mosaic, law.¹ It was these laws to which Jesus took exception throughout his ministry bringing him in direct conflict with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. These laws, while originally rooted in Mosaic Law went far beyond the original intent of God's Laws. They became a stumbling block to faith and relationship with God and a burden of pseudo-righteousness for the Jewish people to uphold. These laws interfered with God's mercy, love and compassion taking precedence over legalistic rules governing every day life.

With a self-righteous and contemptuous tone, the teachers of the law regarded Jesus' words as a pretentious affront to God's power and authority, it was blasphemy against God.² Blasphemy is irreverent, profane, impious speech about God; and its penalty in Old Testament times was death³. This is the charge that prepares the way for the same accusation at Jesus' trial⁴. The scribes were certainly correct that the Scriptures everywhere teach that "God alone," or better "the one God," can forgive sins. Nor did Jesus deny this. The scribes failed to recognize that the reign of God was brought in their midst in Jesus who had the authority to act and speak on behalf of God.

These learned men who were great interpreters of the Law, were also educated in the scriptures including the prophets. They too were anticipating the coming of a messiah, an event well attested to in the prophetic books. They knew what signs to look for in the days of the

¹ NAC

² Bible Knowledge Commentary

³ See Leviticus 24:16

⁴ Mark 14:60-64

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Lord. They knew a prophet, in the likes of Elijah would precede the messiah; and that when the messiah came “the eyes of the blind [will] be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy” (Isaiah 35:5-6). Jesus’ miraculous healings were a sign to all that the messiah had come, but for a variety of reasons, the religious leaders refused to recognize what was happening before their very eyes. This is a theme we will be taking up more thoroughly as our study continues.

The first of criticism reflects the scribes’ unbelief in Jesus’ ability. They look on him as a charlatan offering false hope, forgiveness, and healing. They viewed him as little better than quack. Jesus chooses to address the more difficult issue first – the forgiveness of sins in order to force the scribes to see his actions more clearly. Jesus tells the paralytic *“your sins are forgiven”* and the scribes condescendingly made the point that it is easier to say one’s sins are forgiven because no proof can be *seen*. If Jesus chose to heal the man, evidence of the healing would have been obvious. The scribes don’t believe Jesus’ ability and then question his authority claiming, correctly, that only God can forgive. But Jesus doesn’t stop with forgiving the man. Through forgiving the man first he is able to teach the rest of the gathered crowd something about faith, forgiveness, and healing. Jesus ministered to the “whole man”, to his soul and his body. He tells those present, *“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...”* (v.10) Jesus goes on to heal the man’s physical infirmity. In so doing he confronts the scribes in their criticism forcing them to rethink his words of forgiveness.

Authority is translated from the Greek word *exousia*, which means the lawful right and power. Jesus is telling the scribes in no uncertain terms that he, the “Son of Man” has the lawful right and power not only to heal the sick, but to also forgive sins. If Jesus has that authority, then what does this sign say about who he is? The scribes are forced to witness this sign and consider its meaning. If Jesus has the power and authority to physically heal, and who else but God can speak a word and the man’s body is restored? Then miracle, or sign, points directly to the fact that the power of God dwells in Jesus. Both forgiveness and healing are the work of God.

Verse 11 reveals the faith of the paralytic. The physical healing in itself is also a test of the man’s faith and reveals the extent of his faith. Up to this point the faith of his friends is more evident, but the man’s response to Jesus’ words will reveal the level of his faith. Certainly upon experiencing the physical healing the man recognizes the healing of his soul in knowing he is forgiven. Jesus commanded the paralytic to get up. The paralytic believed Jesus healed him so he responded immediately without hesitation, doubt or question. His response revealed his faith in Jesus’ ability to heal. The man’s faith also revealed unquestioned obedience. Jesus told him to take up his mat and go home, and that is just what the man did. If the one who can order the universe, restore life and health tells you to go home, you go home, you obey.

Remember, we said above that signs are miracles that reveal something about the nature or characteristic of God. The miraculous sign revealed the characteristic of restoration in God’s nature. God, Jesus can and will restore or heal the whole person. All three aspects of the man’s personality are transformed by this healing. He healed the physical impediment, and brings recognition of value to the emotional side of the man’s personality. Most infirm in this time period would have been neglected, devalued, disregarded, and pitied. They were viewed as judged a sinner by God. Their infirmity was evidence of God’s judgment for unforgiven sin in

their lives. What do you think a life-time of this false belief would do to his sense of worth or value as a person? This man was fortunate that he had friends to bring him to Jesus. And Jesus took the time to treat this man as an individual; and lift him up to a life where he could care for himself and potentially others. Finally, Jesus also brought healing to the man's spirit in forgiveness of sin.

While the miracle did all these things for this one man, it did something for all those who witnessed the healing. That is why we call it a *sign* as well as a miracle. Verse 12 says, *"This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'"* The sign revealed the nature of God in and through Jesus. The sign brought faith to those witnessing the healing. All were amazed by Jesus' ability to the supernatural. I love this word amazed. It is translated from the Greek word *exīstēmi* which means literally, "out of their minds". They are absolutely astounded by what they have seen, they are "transported beyond themselves"⁵ by this experience. The power of God to heal this man blew their minds! It was beyond anything they had ever seen, heard or experienced. It was supernatural. And finally, everyone praised God because of the miracle. They ascribed glory to God because of the supernatural power displayed by Jesus. They recognized where the power came from! If the healing was true, then Jesus had to have the ability to forgive sins.

⁵ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary – New Testament*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 604..