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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 10: THE MIRACLES

The miracles performed by Jesus represent one of the most significant aspects of his ministry, but there is more to these important events than we sometimes assume, and this unit looks closely at the miracles to see what we can discover by studying them.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The dictionary defines “miracle” as “an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition). But this definition – while doubtless accurate – is a somewhat dry description of miraculous events! The meaning of the English word is better seen in its etymology which comes from the Latin *miraculum* – “that which causes wonder and astonishment, being inexplicable by normal standards.”

Miracles cannot be explained by science because they transcend the normal laws of nature. But they can be explained by logic because the God who made nature’s laws is perfectly capable of overriding those laws to perform whatever he wills. And miracles, when they occur, certainly do inspire wonder, shock, and awe as they cause people to recognize that God is active in the world.

The miracles recorded in the Old Testament served several functions. Sometimes miracles were used to validate God’s message – as in the wonders Moses performed before Pharaoh (Exodus 7:1–11:10). Sometimes miracles were performed to punish individuals who rebelled against God (Numbers 16), to supply the needs of God’s servants (1 Kings 17:4-6) or people (Exodus 16:1–36), to demonstrate God’s superiority over false gods such as Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40), or for yet other reasons.

In the New Testament, miracles play an important role from the beginning of the ministry of Jesus (see Note 1). The miracles he performed included the provision of food (Mark 6:30–44), or other needs (Matthew 17:24–27), miracles of healing (John 4:46–53), the resurrection of the dead (John 11:1–44), and even control over nature (Matthew 14:25–33). Altogether, the gospels record almost forty miracles of Jesus, although the apostle John stresses that these are only a fraction of all that he did (John 21:25).

Amazing as they may have been, the significance of all these miraculous events does not lie in the events themselves, but in the larger reality to which the miracles point. The fact that something extraordinary occurs – no matter how surprising it may be – does not tell us anything. Only if the event clearly demonstrates divine power is being exercised to teach something is there any meaning in the event. In other words, the significance of a given miracle is what its accomplishment points to – its message. Thus, in the gospels (and especially the Gospel of John), as we will see, a miracle is also called a sign—from the Greek *semeion* – that which signifies or indicates something beyond itself.

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For the writers of the gospels, the miracles of Jesus showed his identity in three very important ways: they showed him to be a great prophet who was foretold in the Old Testament, they showed him to be the promised Messiah also foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures, and they demonstrated that he was the Son of God. We will briefly examine each of these key aspects of the background to Jesus' miracles.

The miracles showed Jesus as a great prophet: Devout Jews of the first century looked – as their ancestors had done for centuries – for the prophet “like Moses” who was foretold to arise (Deuteronomy 18:15–19) and the “Elijah” who was “to come again” (Malachi 4:5). Clearly, these were to be no ordinary prophets. Being like Moses intimated that this particular prophetic figure would have a similar level of impact on the people of Israel. Being an “Elijah” would mean having great works as he (and his successor Elisha) had accomplished. Thus, when we read in Luke 7:16 that the people identified Jesus as a “great prophet” this is what was meant – a prophet of the greatest stature such as Elijah, Elisha, or Moses himself. These “great prophets” all performed miracles (unlike many of even the most important other prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, or John the Baptist whom God used mightily, but without miracles). As we will see in this unit, many of the miracles of Jesus were given in such a way as to noticeably equal or surpass those of the three greatest prophets – Moses, Elijah, and Elisha.

The miracles showed Jesus as the promised Messiah: Beyond looking for the great prophets who were foretold, the Jewish people also looked for the promised Messiah (“Anointed One” or “Christ”) who would be a descendant of King David who would deliver his people and eventually sit on David’s throne (Isaiah 9:6–7; 11:1–9; etc.). Many Old Testament prophets spoke of this Messiah, and none more so than the prophet Isaiah. For example, when John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus, asking if he were, in fact, the awaited Messiah (Luke 7:18–23), Jesus pointed to his own miraculous works as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 35:5–6: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” Even the Jews’ enemies, the Samaritans, understood the promise of the Messiah. In John chapter 4, after Jesus miraculously told a Samaritan woman details of her personal life, she witnessed to the people of the city, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” (4:29). After confirming this was true, the people of the city replied, “this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (4:42 NKJV).

The miracles showed Jesus to be the Son of God: All the gospels imply that the miracles of Jesus indicated his identity not only as the promised prophet and Messiah, but also as the actual Son of God. But this is nowhere truer than in the Gospel of John – the main theme of which is to show the divinity of Jesus (John 1:14; etc.). Unlike the other gospel writers, John actually does not use the usual Greek word for miracles, but refers instead to Jesus’ miracles as “signs,” showing the main reason for these events was to act as signs of Jesus’ divine nature. Also, rather than trying to catalogue as many of these miraculous signs as possible, John simply selects and describes seven of them which in some way or another show a particular aspect of Jesus’ divine identity. John also makes it clear that unlike the works of God done through human prophets, the signs Jesus performed were by his own divine power. The apostle bookends his gospel with two statements supporting this. Near the beginning of his account, he gives the story of Nathaniel who, after Jesus demonstrated miraculous power, exclaimed: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God ...” (John 1:49). At the end of his gospel, he likewise summarizes: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God ...” (John 20:30–31).

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

A major misunderstanding regarding the miracles of Jesus is that they were given to induce people to believe in him. In reality, Jesus deplored the attitude of those who needed “signs and wonders” in order to believe (John 4:48) and taught that even miracles may be performed by false Christs (Matthew 24:24). It is also clear that while many marveled at the miraculous deeds he accomplished, in many cases this did not lead to belief, and it certainly did not do so among the hard-hearted Pharisees and other religious leaders who rejected Jesus all the more strenuously – claiming that he performed his miracles with the help of demons (Matthew 9:33–34; etc.). They knew this was untrue, of course, because they knew Jesus regularly cast out demons (Matthew 8:16; etc.).

In fact, the gospels show us that miracles were often a *result* rather than a *cause* of individual faith and belief. Christ frequently commented on the belief of those he healed, often asked them if they believed *before* he performed a miracle for them, and Mark’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was unable to perform many miracles in his home-town area because of the lack of belief of the people there (Mark 6:4–6). Clearly, this does not fit with the idea that Jesus’ miracles were intended to produce or develop belief.

The truth is, the gospels are in agreement that Christ’s miracles were never intended to produce faith where it did not exist in people. Instead, most of his miracles were performed as signs that showed something about the identity and nature of Jesus himself. This is a vital distinction to keep in mind. The gospels also make it clear that they only record a very few of the miracles Jesus performed (John 20:30; 21:25; etc.), and by looking closely at the ones they did select to recount, we can often see what it was about Jesus to which the particular miracle pointed.

We have already mentioned how a number of the miracles of Jesus brought to mind the biblical prophet Elijah or his successor Elisha, and we will look at those parallels more closely here. Although the gospels and Jesus himself state that John the Baptist fulfilled a role as the promised “Elijah to come” (Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:13–14; and see Note 2), Jesus also fulfilled an Elijah-like role as part of his own prophesied identity. While, as Jesus confirmed, John was the Elijah to come as a prophet to announce the Messiah, but did no miracles; Jesus was also an Elijah to come who did the work of Elijah by performing miracles that were strikingly parallel to those of the great prophet and his anointed successor Elisha.

For example, Matthew 15 and Mark 7 relate how Jesus traveled to the Phoenician area of Tyre and Sidon and there healed the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, just as Elijah had travelled to Phoenicia and raised up the son of a widow in the city of Sidon (1 Kings 17). In the same way, in Luke 7 and Matthew 8, we find that Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion in a story that is strikingly similar to that of Elisha healing Naaman, a general who was said to be the “servant” of the king of Syria (2 Kings 5:4,6).

If we look more deeply at these stories, the parallels are even further-reaching. In the case of the women healed by Elijah and Jesus, both were gentiles of Phoenicia – regarded by the Jews as religiously and socially inferior in terms of both gender and ethnicity. Similarly, Naaman was an officer of Israel’s enemy Syria, just as the centurion was an officer of Judea’s enemy Rome – both were not only gentiles, but also of the same hated profession. There are further similarities: Naaman was a highly valued servant of the king of Syria who is told he need not go all the way to the prophet’s house. In the centurion’s case, the servant is said to be highly valued by his master, and the centurion sends word that Jesus need not go all the way to his house. Both the individuals involved in these healings by Jesus – the only clearly gentile individuals recorded as being healed by him – are directly parallel to the very Old Testament examples Jesus himself cited when he spoke in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth (Luke 4:25-27).

There are many more similarities between the miracles of Jesus and those of Elijah. Jesus multiplied food (loaves and fishes) for hungry crowds when a boy was willing to share what he had (John 6:1–9), just as Elijah multiplied flour and oil for a starving widow and her son when she was willing to share what little she had (1 Kings 17:13–14). Jesus also ascended to heaven in clouds as his disciples watched (Acts 1:9–11), just as Elijah is said to have been taken up as his disciple Elisha watched (2 Kings 2:11–12).

In all these stories the miracles of Jesus were clearly intended to show him as the new Elijah, just as other miracles showed him to be the promised prophet like Moses, or the Messiah. Space does not permit us to look at all the ways Jesus' miracles showed something about him, but we can also remember the story we read in Unit 9 in which Jesus healed a blind man by using his saliva – thus indicating his legitimacy, because the Jews of the time believed that the saliva of a legitimate firstborn son had healing properties.

In fact, most of the miracles of Jesus pointed to him and stressed something of his identity, nature, and mission. Jesus confirmed this himself on several occasions – as when he told those around him that some of his miracles were done “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Luke 5:24 ESV), or when he told his disciples to believe in his oneness with the Father because of his miraculous works (John 14:11). The miracles of Jesus were not done to develop faith, but primarily to teach us lessons about Jesus that could be taught no other way.

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

While all the gospels record miracles of Jesus, the Gospel of John provides by far the most focused and interpretive of these accounts. John describes only seven carefully selected miracles – most of them not recorded in the other gospel accounts – but he describes them at some length, and unlike the other gospel writers he often gives details that help us see what each miracle signified. Importantly, the writers of the first three gospels frequently use the word *dunamis* meaning “mighty works” in speaking of Jesus' supernatural deeds. But as we have seen, John usually uses the word *semeia* or “signs” (found seventeen times in his gospel) when describing them. For John, the miracles of Jesus were signs not only of *who* Jesus was, but also *what* he was – his nature and being.

The first sign — the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11) — is prefaced by Jesus telling his mother that “my hour has not yet come.” Yet, although it was not a time of his choosing, in order to honor his parent and help others, Jesus performed his first miracle. But the purpose of the miracle is made clear by John — that in it, Jesus “revealed his glory” (vs. 11). Although we are told that after this miracle “his disciples believed in him,” this implies no more than that they accepted he was a powerful prophet at this point, because we see the phrase repeated and his disciples' belief growing as the gospel progresses.

The second sign — the healing of a royal official's son (John 4:46–54) — takes place at a distance. John shows that all Jesus had to do was tell the man: “Go. Your son will live.” This event illustrated that Jesus' word alone was powerful enough to provide a miracle and reminds us of the prologue of John's Gospel where he states that Jesus is himself the powerful and effective Word of God (John 1:1). The event is also a clear example of faith leading to a miracle (John 1:50), rather than the opposite.

The third sign — the healing of a paralyzed man (John 5:1–9) — was performed, like the sixth sign, on a Sabbath day, and through these signs John shows Jesus as “the Lord of the Sabbath” (as he is stated to be in the other three gospels, but not directly in the fourth gospel). John points out that this message began to arouse the anger and hatred of the Jewish religious leaders of the time.

The fourth sign — the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1–14) — was apparently selected by John because it was with this miracle that “After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’” That this is the significance of the miracle for John is seen in the fact that he alone of the gospel writers tells us this was the effect of the miracle on those who witnessed it. The miracle also pointed, of course, to Jesus as the spiritual “bread of life,” as Christ himself explained after the event (John 6:35), and showed him to be greater than Moses who provided only temporary food for Israel (John 6:32).

The fifth sign — the walking on water of the storm-tossed sea (John 6:16–21) — continues the pattern of establishing Jesus as greater than the Old Testament prophets. While Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha all parted waters with divine help, Jesus was unique, of course, in walking on the water. Yet the description of the miracle is the shortest of those recorded by John (only five verses) and is given as an inset within the story of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus’ words regarding the bread of life (which are given sixty-six verses). Uniquely John does not comment on this miracle, perhaps because it speaks for itself.

The sixth sign — the healing of the man who was born blind (John 9:1–41) — carries clear indications of its significance. John shows us that directly before healing the blind man, Jesus told his disciples “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” We have already mentioned how the manner in which Jesus accomplished this miracle — utilizing mud and saliva — played on a belief of the Jews regarding legitimate firstborn sons. With this miracle Jesus showed himself as being legitimate to his enemies and as the light of the world to those who believed in him.

The seventh sign — raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:17–44) — was in some ways the ultimate miracle Jesus performed, and it was because of this act that the Jewish authorities decided Jesus must be killed. The significance of the miracle was made plain by Jesus himself: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (vs. 25). Not surprisingly, this miracle was preceded by a great expression of faith on the part of Lazarus’ sister Martha who, when asked by Jesus if she believed, replied: “Yes, Lord ...I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One coming into the world” (vs. 27 BSV) — essentially all of the three roles described in the first section of this unit.

We can see that the miracles, as John lists them, increase in power and momentousness from the physically unlikely to the physically impossible. There is also an increasing intensity in the significance of these signs. While, unlike the Synoptics, John’s Gospel includes no parables, the signs he records serve as enacted parables which build sequentially and produce a cumulative message of who Jesus is. As we have seen, a number of the seven sign-miracles clearly showed Jesus’ superiority to Moses and Elijah, while others identified him as the promised Messiah and the Son of God.

But the miracles Jesus performed were not only about his identity. Jesus used the power at his disposal to fulfill his mission with very few, if any, exceptions. Yet John’s seven signs and the miracles recorded in the other gospels show that Jesus frequently performed miracles out of compassion for others, and we should note that more attention is given to Jesus’ healing miracles in the gospels than to any other aspect of his ministry — including even his teaching (see Note 3).

In the same way, when Jesus first sent out his disciples to continue and expand his own work, we read that: “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:1–2). We cannot separate the compassion of Jesus from the power and purpose of his many miracles, or from the commission he gave his disciples — a fact from which we too can learn regarding our use of the resources we have been given in this life, whether they are physical, financial, or whatever.

* Note 1: It is not surprising that the first temptation Satan leveled at Jesus in his wilderness temptations was to attempt to have Jesus misuse the miraculous power at his disposal.

* Note 2: John the Baptist humbly denied he was any of the prophesied figures expected by the Jews – the Prophet, the Elijah, or the Messiah (John 1:19-26), but Jesus' words and the angelic announcement of John's birth show that he did share part of the role of the Elijah to come. Yet Jesus fulfilled other parts of that same Elijah-like role. This is no different from King David fulfilling parts of the role of the promised Messiah (Psalm 89; Isaiah 55; Jeremiah 33; Ezekiel 34, 37; Hosea 3), yet Jesus fulfilled the major portion of that prophesied role.

* Note 3: All the gospels stress that Jesus not only preached and taught, but also performed many miracles, most of which were healings. For example, Matthew points this out in two carefully positioned parallel summaries (Matthew 4:23 and 9:35) which he has placed immediately before and after the Sermon on the Mount (given in Matthew 5–7) and the collection of miracle stories (given in Matthew 8–9) which follows the sermon. The two summary statements are essentially identical: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (4:23); “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (9:35). These two summaries frame Matthew's great examples of the words and works (stressing the healings) of Jesus and are his central summaries of Christ's ministry.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Briefly summarize the three main aspects of his identity that are signified by the recorded miracles of Jesus.

Beneath the Surface:

It is often instructive to look at the ways in which people responded to the miracles Jesus performed on their behalf. Compare the response of the man who had been lame for thirty-eight years (John 5:1–15) with that of the man Jesus healed who had been born blind (John 9: 1–41).

Everyday Applications:

No matter how small the powers we may have been given in this life, how do we use the powers we do have whether financial, emotional, talents, influence, or whatever?

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