

It's Up to You 2025 (Week 5) - What am I supposed to make of all miracles in the gospels?

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. Yesterday's question was "What am I supposed to make of all those miracles in the gospels?" This comes directly from our Lenten reading through the Gospel of Mark. No doubt why...40% Mark's content is somehow related to a miracle.



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2. First off, what do we mean by "miracle"? The gospels use several different words/phrases for a miracle, each with its own nuance: a) a "wonder" or "wonderful work" which focuses on the awe or worship evoked by the miracle, b) a "mighty act" or "deed of power," which centers on the miracle being beyond human capacity, something only God could do, and c) a "sign" which points to Jesus' identity as God's Son, His Mission, or His close connection to the Father. Father John Meier, one of the great American New Testament scholars of the last 50 years, has a threefold definition of a miracle as seen in the gospels: a miracle is "1) an extraordinary event, 2) that finds no reasonable explanation in human abilities or other known forces that operate in our world of time and space, and 3) so is in a special act of God doing what no human power can do."

3. The miracle stories in the gospels are one of those places where you feel the tension between the ancient world, text, and worldview and our own modern point of view. There are two polar opposite errors to avoid about these stories: a) presentism, which is to assume that how we see the world now is far superior to how anyone did in the past, and b) wooden literalism, which neglects that the gospels aren't modern history texts and that many features of the miracle stories are meant to be symbolic, not literal/actual.

4. While each gospel handles miracles with some distinction - like in Mark Jesus often tells people not to tell others about them - we can still identify some commonalities across the four gospels. Here are two: a) miracles occur for those who desperately need them, who are facing circumstances that they can't resolve on their own, and/or who have been marginalized or overlooked by society at large, and b) while it seems like it's raining miracles in the gospels sometimes, do note that each person only receives one...there are no repeat customers, so to speak.

5. Very soon after Jesus' resurrection, the first Christians defended their claims about Jesus by referring to His miracles (see Peter on the day of Pentecost in [Acts 2.22](#) and while presenting the message of Christ to those who aren't Jewish in [Acts 10.38](#), for example). Even secular writers from the era of the New Testament, like several Roman officials and Josephus the Jewish historian, attested to Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker. But, and this is important, that shouldn't surprise us: many figures in the Greco-Roman world, from various rabbis and prophets to pagan religious leaders to even a couple of Roman emperors, were said to be those who had or could perform miracles. In fact, some of the gospel miracle stories are written in such a way that they're obviously contrasting Jesus' miracles with others like them done by some of these others.

6. Ok, if that's a decent 10,000 foot overview of miracles in the gospels, what are some important takeaways? First, note that the English words "faith," "believe," "trust," and other synonyms all tie back to one ancient Greek root, and 2/3s of the time you encounter that root in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, it is tied directly to a miracle. That means faith and miracles are intimately connected in the gospel texts. How? Here's how renowned New Testament scholar James Dunn puts it: "In the gospels, faith then must be understood as a trusting in God's power, an openness and receptivity to the power of God...Jesus looked for faith in those to whom He ministered. Faith was the necessary complement to the exercise of God's power through Him...Faith, as it were, in the recipient completed the circuit so that the power could flow." So faith - lots of it or over a long period of time - doesn't guarantee a miracle, but it does open us to the possibility of one, or, in Dunne's great image, it closes the circuit so God's power can pour forth.

7. But the gospels also make the opposite case. In [Mark 6.1-6](#), we note that Jesus couldn't do any miracles in His own hometown of Nazareth because they were so firmly set against Him. To use Dunn's analogy again, the circuit was never completed, so God's power couldn't flow. Similarly, at the end of Jesus' public ministry near the start of Holy Week in John's gospel, we're told explicitly that all of Jesus' signs and wonders did not generate faith amongst many of the people ([John 12.37](#)). This denudes a common false hope: it isn't true that if God were to show up in some big, boisterous way (a miracle) that you or anyone else would automatically believe.

8. The gospels would also want us to ask WHY Jesus did the miracles that He did, because that why is telling. Jurgen Moltmann, the esteemed German theologian, offers this revealing answer: "When Jesus expels demons and heals the sick, He is driving out of creation the powers of destruction, and is healing and restoring created beings who are hurt and sick. The lordship of God to which the healings witness, restores creation to health. Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly 'natural' thing in a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded." So Jesus' miracles are a breaking of God's good and final future into the present, and this future is the 'natural world' to God, not the one in which we live now. This also why Jesus offers up not only miracles but the poor receiving the good news of His message as evidence to John the Baptist of God's Kingdom beginning to dawn through Jesus' own ministry ([Luke 7.22-23](#)); both are indicative of God's new creation that is taking shape.

9. Third, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson gives an important caveat in regard to miracles, in both the gospels and our own spiritual experience. In the gospels, he notes, Jesus' teaching is seen to be every bit as powerful and authoritative as His miracles, which is the eye-candy to which we're drawn, rendering His teaching somehow more prosaic. Likewise, if we're fixated on miracles received or not received in our own lives and churches, Johnson contends that we can miss that God is ever-present and ever-working in what we mislabel as mundane acts of love, forgiveness, generosity, courage, sacrifice, etc. To that end, he writes, "Human beings are called to see God's activity everywhere... and miracles in everything. Everything that exists is wondrous and ultimately inexplicable in worldly terms...The miraculous is not, as modernity would have it, an exception to the well-ordered laws of nature, but is rather a gracious demonstration of the power of God...Christianity rejects attempts to demystify the world as erroneous, as an idolatrous effort to adopt a set of mechanical explanations to replace the beauty and mystery inherent in the veiled dance called existence."

10. One final insight about miracles, this one not from the life of Jesus per se but from the later New Testament (e.g., [1st Corinthians 13.2](#)) and early church history: Christian maturity and normal experience is not about miracles as much as (in the words of Luke Timothy Johnson) "the quiet moral change in humans and in the structures of human life and society." We live in a culture that salivates over and seeks out the sensational; too often, certain versions of Christianity today fall prey to the same malady in regard to miracles.

A Prayer for the Week

We used this at the end of the sermon, you can weave it into your prayer this week...Adapted from Edgewater Presbyterian Church (Chicago, IL):

God of mercy, God of impossible things, we come to You from the edge of hope, where the ground feels like it's crumbling beneath our feet. You know the weight we carry. You know the fear that creeps in while we wait. You know the prayers we whisper through tears, and the ones we can't even find the strength to speak.

We ask You now, O God, for a miracle, not because we are worthy, but because You are compassionate. Not because we know the way forward, but because You have walked with the lost, lifted the broken, and made a way through the wilderness.

For those who are drowning in grief, bring peace that passes understanding. For those who are sick and growing weaker, bring healing, or rest, or both. For those who face ruin or a dead-end, open a door where none seems to exist. And those who have been ignored, pushed aside, or disregarded for far too long, show up for them in such a way that they know unmistakably that You see them and love them.

- PAUSE FOR PERSONAL PRAYER -

And when the miracle doesn't come as we imagined, when the answer is delayed, or different, or hidden, give us the faith to believe You are still near. Give us the courage to keep going. Give us the love to hold each other through the storm. We lift up every desperate soul to You, O God. Do what only You can do. Make a way. Make us whole, oh God made known to us in Christ the great healer and wonder-worker, amen.

Explore More this Week

- In Matthew's gospel, we're told at the beginning of Jesus' ministry that He did two things primarily: He taught and performs signs and wonders ([Matthew 4.23-25](#)). We are then given an example of His teaching (The Sermon on the Mount in [Matthew 5-7](#)) and then examples of His miracles (10 are crammed into [Matthew 8-9](#)). Maybe invest your Bible reading time this week by reading through those two chapters (Matt. 8-9) and see what commonalities you might find in the stories, or how they inspire you to be more bold in what you ask God to do for others?
- How our own denomination talks through the intricacies of miracles in the modern world: [Miracles](#)
- Here's a short devotional about miracles: [Miracle Ready](#)
- Here's a short excerpt of how biblical scholar N. T. Wright describes the role of the miracles in the gospels: [N.T. Wright on Miracles](#)
- Two entry-level books on miracles, the first on miracles in the gospels and the second on the possibility of miracles today, with a special focus on why the church elsewhere in the world tends to experience more than we do in the Western (North American and European) church: [Signs and Wonders: Levine, Amy-Jill](#) and [Miracles Today: Craig S. Keener](#)
Bonus interview with the author of the 2nd book here: [Craig Keener - Miracles](#)
- C. S. Lewis wrote one of the classic Christian defenses of the possibility of miracles. You can check out an overview of his esteemed book here: [Lewis Materials - Study Guide - Miracles.doc](#)