

The Miracles of Christ

Lord our God, we are about to study Your mighty works through the hand of our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that as we do so, we would again feel Your power, even if we have studied these stories and read them or heard them told, over and over since we were little children. We pray, Lord, that we would regain or retain that awe before Your mighty hand and appreciate that all of Your works in Christ are loving, redeeming, and restoring. We pray that we would have our confidence in and our affection for You rekindled through our time. Let us remember too that these are not magical things that change a heart just by eyes seeing them. I pray, Lord, that we would remember the lessons that we see tonight, because many people saw but did not believe and did not take to heart what was there. I pray that we would be eager to share with those who do not yet believe and that we ourselves would be prayerful to respond in full faith as You enable us. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

To study Jesus' miracles we will use the Gospel of Matthew as our starting point, especially Matthew 8. One of the first questions that people ask about miracles is, "What do these all mean?" Why did Jesus perform miracles? And what is their significance in His ministry? Is He simply trying to show that He is powerful? There are many answers given to these questions.

One answer is that Jesus performed miracles in order to instill faith and to give people confidence in Him—to show His deity and to help them believe in His deity. But if Jesus' miracles proved His deity, what did Moses' miracles prove? They didn't prove Moses was divine, so miracles by themselves don't prove that someone is divine. All they prove is that someone is an agent of God and that God is moving them. Peter's miracles did not prove he was divine. In Acts, Paul's miracles made some pagans think he was divine and he was horrified by that response.

Another answer is that miracles were given to increase faith. That would be true in some cases, but it is also true that Jesus' miracles sometimes made people's hearts get hard.

Some people say miracles were a reward for faith, but the truth is that many people who received miracles were not believers at all. When Jesus fed the five thousand not everyone who received the bread was a believer. So that explanation does not apply to all miracles.

We commonly hear the phrase, "Actions speak louder than words." In some ways that applies to Jesus' ministry. His actions speak. The question is, what are His actions saying? The Gospel of Matthew gives a couple of answers. One answer comes in a structural device known as an *inclusio*—related to the word "inclusion." This is a repeated phrase that brackets off a large section of a book. There are quite a few *inclusios* in the Gospels and a few in the rest of the New Testament. One of the most important of the *inclusios* is found in Matthew 4:23 and 9:35. First we read, "Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, healing every disease and sickness among the people." Then we read, "Jesus went through all the towns and villages teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness." In the Greek there is only one word different between those two passages.

Matthew 4:23 begins a section. It lists three activities of Jesus: He teaches in the synagogues; He preaches the good news; He heals every disease. Matthew 9:35 says the same thing. Matthew 5 - 7, the Sermon on the Mount, is Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. It is probably very close to what He taught in the synagogue. He is proclaiming kingdom life. Then, Chapters 8 and 9 are the rest of the story that is summarized here—namely, He is healing every disease and sickness among the people. It is a two-fold ministry: His words and His work. His preaching and teaching and His healing cohere, making

one whole picture of Jesus' activities. And all of that activity is related to the presence of the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount is about the kingdom and its righteousness, while chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew are the works of the kingdom. The work of Christ embraces body and soul, spirit and flesh, word and works.

So while Jesus proclaims "the kingdom is here," He proves it with miracles. He sometimes says that the miracles He performs prove that the power of Satan has been broken. One time when He healed He declared, "This woman has been released from her bondage to Satan" (Luke 13:16). The words and the works together show that the kingdom is present.

This is shown in Matthew 7:24-27 and also in Matthew 8. Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount saying, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." That is a fine translation from the NIV. But literally from the Greek we read, word for word, "Everyone who hears Me these words." Jesus is saying, "When you heard the Sermon on the Mount, you weren't just hearing words; you were hearing Me."

Of course, every time you hear somebody's words, you hear that person. But there are times when a person's words are not really that person. Sometimes when I lecture I depart from my notes and, if what I say seems especially good, a student will come to me after and ask me to repeat the points. I have to say to him, "I wish I could but I don't really know what I said. I liked it too. If you find somebody who wrote notes about what I said, bring them to me and I'll put it in my notes for next time, because that is the way I wanted to say it." I know other teachers have had that experience. That is one way in which my words and I are not really one. I say things but they're not exactly mine. They just sort of come to me.

If you listen to your pastor over a span of years, you may love him very much and hang on his words. But occasionally, pastors change their mind and really sharp people in the church will say to him, "I like what you said, but that sounds kind of different from what you said four years ago on the same theme." The pastor will have to explain the change. That is how we distance our words from ourselves. Jesus doesn't do that. He doesn't change His mind or forget a point He made. He doesn't say, "I have surpassed that level of development." When you hear His words, you hear Him. He has a unity that doesn't hold for any other human being. There is a unity between His words and His person that is completely different from all other connections that we have with our words. Jesus' words are His spirit.

Furthermore, when Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount, He sounds authoritative. Matthew 7:28 says that, "when He finished these things, the crowds were amazed at His teachings because He taught as one who had authority and not like the scribes." Several times in His sermon Jesus declared without apology, "You have heard this was said, but I say to you." In fact, on fourteen different occasions in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "I say to you."

Also, Jesus doesn't quote anybody. No one has any authority that He's interested in. He didn't need an authority. As a teacher, when I say something radical, I am usually going to cite a great scholar who believes it too. But Jesus doesn't need any scholars to back Him up. In fact, all they could do is detract from His message because He is the real authority.

When Jesus said, "Truly I say to you..." some people might have reacted, "Where do You get the right to speak that way?" Somebody who doesn't see Him as the Lord and just sees Him as an arrogant upstart who never went to rabbinic school might say, "Where do You get the right to speak so differently from the prophets?"

In a sense, Matthew 8 and 9 are a long answer to that challenge. The answer is that Jesus' word has power. In Mathew 8:1-4, Jesus heals a leper with a word—"Be clean"—and the leper is immediately cleansed. Next a centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant (Matt. 8:5-13). Jesus offers to come to him but the centurion says He doesn't need to: "Just say the word and my servant will be healed." Jesus says the word, and his servant is healed. Later, many come to Jesus who are demon possessed and He drives out the spirits with a word (Matt. 8:16). All He needed to do was speak. He didn't have to do anything more than that.

The fact that Jesus did not perform any gestures on most occasions stands in contrast to records of other exorcisms. Consider what is recorded by the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, in his *Antiquities*. He is describing an exorcist whom he had heard about.

"For I have seen a certain man of my own country whose name was Eleazar, releasing people that were demoniacal in the presence of [emperor] Vespasian...and the whole multitude of his soldiers...He put a ring that had a root...to the nostril of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils; and when the man fell down immediately, he abjured him to return into him no more, making still mention of Solomon, and reciting the incantations which he composed...He set a little way off a cup or basin full of water, and commanded the demon, as he went out of the man, to overturn it, and thereby to let the spectators know that he had left the man and when this was done the skill and wisdom of Solomon were shown very manifestly."
Josephus, Antiquities, 8.2.5.

That is one of several accounts from antiquity describing the way other people got rid of demons. Very often there were people who tried to claim the right to perform miracles, to cast out demons, and they always did it with a ritual—with incantations, spells, lengthy prayers, maybe in the middle of the night by candlelight with clouds of incense.

But Jesus says a word and it is done. Luke 4:31-38 shows the same thing. Jesus went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, teaching the people.

"In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, 'Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!' 'Be quiet!' Jesus said sternly. 'Come out of him!' Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him. All the people were amazed and said to each other, 'What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!'"

In the Greek this passage ends with a slightly different word. It says in the NIV, "What is this teaching?" But in the Greek it says "What is this word?" Jesus speaks a word, and it happens. So by His word He speaks authoritatively on life in the kingdom, and by words He performs mighty deeds. Both manifest the kingdom and both manifest His authority and His power.

This gives us the big picture in Matthew 5-9 and also in Luke 4. Luke developed the same idea in different ways, but it is in both Gospels.

Let's look at a few miracles. The first miracle in Matthew is found in chapter 8, the healing of a leper. It says in verse 1 that Jesus came down from a mountain and as He did, a man with leprosy came and knelt

before Him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Try to picture this in your mind.

The leper comes to Jesus and he kneels before Jesus, which is a way of doing two things. First, it is a way of showing the reverence in which he holds Jesus. We don’t know if he is worshiping Jesus as God. It might be what you would do to a king or great man in antiquity. Many people believed that great people had a spark of the divine and bowed before them. It’s a way of showing reverence. Second, it is also a way of keeping his distance, because after all, he is a leper and so he speaks his place.

Jesus says, “I am willing; be clean.” Then Jesus reaches out. Think of how this would seem if you were there. Leprosy is an incurable disease of the skin. Anyone who touches a diseased person becomes unclean. You would be worried that Jesus would be defiled and perhaps that Jesus would be violating the law of Moses. But Jesus reaches out and touches the man and says, “I am willing; be clean.”

Think of how this would be if you were this man. It would be the first time you had been touched by a non-leper since you were known to have the disease. It would probably be, in some ways, horrifying. But in other ways it would be deeply comforting and profoundly moving that Jesus, whom you might even know as Savior, would actually reach out and touch you.

When Jesus touched the leper He did not contract the man’s uncleanness, but the leper caught Jesus’ cleanliness. He was entirely cured, and Jesus then told him to go show himself to the priests. The touch would be almost sacramental—a sign that something was about to happen and showed Jesus’ power. It also suggests that Jesus’ power is not just “abstract.” If you were a leper living in that time, when you contracted leprosy, you were excluded from society. You had to leave your home, the city, your family, your friends, and your job, and live with other lepers outside the city. So when Jesus touched this man, it wasn’t just an act of physical healing; it was an act of healing him socially, of restoring him to society.

The second miracle Matthew records describing the power of Christ is that of the healing of a centurion’s servant. This occurred in Capernaum at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus’ base of operations. The centurion is a Roman. Some people say that everybody hated the Romans, but others disagree and point to this particular episode. Here is a man who seems to have lived at peace with the people around him. The Gospel of Luke tells us something additional. Luke 7:1-10 points out that Jewish leaders interceded on his behalf and told Jesus He should fulfill his request because he had built their synagogue and loved the nation of Israel. So maybe it wasn’t only strife between Romans and Jews after all.

The fact that the second miracle Jesus performed is not for a Jew but for a Roman centurion already gives us some hints about the diversity of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus reached clean and unclean, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, adults and children. He healed people from all over Galilee. And we can also see that Jesus’ miracles covered every realm, every range of action. We see His power over disease, nature, demons, and sins!

Unlike the story of the leper, this story does not focus on the drama. Instead, it focuses on Jesus’ teaching. In my book, *Getting the Message*, I talk about ways to describe different stories. This would be a report rather than a full-blown narrative. Reports ordinarily lead to a very short description of the miracle, but then contain a theological discussion at the end that reveals what the miracle is all about. The centurion approaches, whether directly (Matt. 8), or indirectly through intermediaries of emissaries (Luke). The request is a statement that his servant is lying paralyzed. Jesus simply offers to go and heal him. The centurion says, “That’s really not necessary. First of all, I’m not worthy of it, and second, you

don't need to. All you have to do is say the word and it will be done." He explains he knows that Jesus can do this because he knows the way it is in the military. When a commander gives an order, it is done. He doesn't have to watch it be done; it gets done without his watching. Jesus said, "I've never seen such faith in Israel." It was praise for the centurion, as well as an implicit condemnation of Israel, hence His words, "Many will come from east and west and take their places and feast with Abraham, but the sons of the kingdom will be thrown out" (Matt. 8:11). When Jesus says, "I've never seen such faith in Israel," that's wonderful praise for the centurion, but it is also a hint that Israel is not as faithful as it ought to be.

Israel did not always miss the point though. Jesus continues teaching, and healing more people, including Peter's mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14-17). Matthew reports that there were lots of people being healed, demon-possessed people and all kinds of sick people. He writes that this happened to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases." It is always important for readers to look up the Old Testament passages they find in the Gospel text. The text comes from Isaiah 53:4, in the chapter that prophesies the suffering servant and focuses on the theme of substitutionary atonement. It tells us of Jesus bearing our sins. In fact, verse 4 is ordinarily quoted to show substitutionary atonement:

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:4-6).

We read these verses through the lens of substitutionary atonement, and rightly so, seeing Jesus as the one cursed in our place. Matthew is saying there is healing in Jesus' death, not only substitution and removal of punishment. It is not just that we avoid judgment. We're brought not only into heaven, but we receive many other blessings beside. We receive healing before the judgment seat of God with other kinds of healing too. Isaiah says, "by his wounds we are healed," not by His wounds we are forgiven. That is true but what he says actually is, "by his wounds we are healed and he carried our sorrows and our infirmities."

Matthew is telling us that in order to understand Jesus' ministry, you have to understand its relationship to Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 explains a lot of things about Jesus' ministry. Isaiah's prophecy, "He not open His mouth" seems to explain what He did at His trial. He was assigned a grave with the rich at His death (Isa. 53:9) explains Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus. Isaiah wrote, "My righteous servant will justify many" (Isa. 53:11) and Jesus said, "I give my life as a ransom for many." Isaiah 53 is in some ways the most important chapter in the whole Old Testament to understand Jesus' ministry as portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew. One of the things we could especially learn is that Jesus' entire healing ministry rests on His substitutionary death. When He gave Himself for us, living a perfect life, dying on the cross, rising again, He opened up entire realms of restoration for our lives which should begin even now.

Matthew connects this idea of salvation and healing in a number of ways. In Matthew 1:21, the angel said, "He will be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." That word, "save," is one of the most common words that Jesus uses for healing. When somebody is healed it says literally in the Greek that they were "saved."

This connection between healing and salvation is strengthened by the story of the healing of the paralytic. Before Jesus raises the man from his mat He says, "Your sins are forgiven," connecting the

remission of sins with the healing of disease or the removal of trouble. This twofold connection shows that in Jesus' ministry the Messianic age has dawned. Consider Isaiah 29:18-20, which depicts two aspects of the Messianic age—freedom from sin, as well as physical wellbeing:

“In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down.”

Both physical healing and spiritual healing are promised. We see the same thing in chapter 32 of Isaiah:

“See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land. Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen. The mind of the rash will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear” (v. 1-4).

This passage shows the interweaving of people who are physically harmed and those who are spiritually harmed, those who can't talk and those who talk foolishness, those who can't see at all and those who can't see spiritually. All will be healed together in the age of the Messiah.

Matthew 8:18-22 shows that this teaching, together with these deeds, call for a response. In this passage, people come up to Jesus because they have been intrigued or moved by what they have seen.

A teacher of the law came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, I will follow you where ever you go.” Readers should be suspicious since this person is a scribe. The scribes are often Jesus' enemies. Also this person seems to think he gets to choose discipleship. But the only way we have seen people become Jesus' disciples is if He chooses them. That is the way people became disciples in the ancient world, in Israel, at the time. People said to a rabbi, “I want to be a disciple. Will you let me be your disciple?” So this scribe is basically seeing Jesus as a rabbi. He uses the word, “teacher,” which is one and the same word as “rabbi.” So Jesus is approached by a man who seems to have good intentions, but he doesn't quite realize what he is doing. He is a bit too bold. Jesus seems to put him off a little bit. He says, “Before you get involved in this, you need to know that foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but they're better off than I am.” You never find out what happens because Matthew never tells us. There is no indication that this scribe began following Jesus.

Then another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” This seems like an improvement. The first guy called Jesus, “teacher,” but this one calls Him “Lord.” Another hopeful sign is that this man is a disciple, not a scribe. One might think that his love for his father was also a good thing, but that may not be the case. In the ancient world, lacking refrigeration or air conditioning, you had to bury someone right away, within twenty-four hours, otherwise they would begin to stink badly. It is highly unlikely that this disciple's father had already died. If he had died this man would be dealing with it, taking care of private arrangements rather than out speaking with Jesus.

When he says, “Let me go bury my father,” what he means is that his father is old. His father's death is foreseeable. Jesus says to him pretty bluntly: “You follow Me and let the dead bury their own dead.” What He means by that is certainly metaphorical, because He can't mean for a dead corpse to bury another dead corpse. The whole problem is that corpses can't do anything. That's why you bury them. They don't bury themselves; you have to do it for them. So the physically dead can't bury the physically

dead, but the spiritually dead can do so. Jesus is saying that even this concern with the good duties, the sensible obligations of this life, are inferior and have to be subordinated to the superior claims of Christ. When He says “Follow Me,” He even uses the Greek way of giving a command, meaning “You follow Me now and keep on following”—a present imperative. “You continually follow me. Follow Me always.”

Matthew doesn't say what happened to either one of these men. One reason might be that it wasn't that important whether they followed or not. Another reason might be he didn't know. Probably the most likely reason is, if he had told us, that would have made it too easy for us to judge these men rather than think about our own conduct. By leaving it open-ended, Matthew forces you to decide for the character. What do you think is the right response? Jesus' words still speak to us about subordinating the good duties of this life to the great duties of loyalty to Christ even at great cost.

We come to another range of miracles that can be called miracles of lordship. The first is the calming of the storm, which shows that Jesus is the Lord over nature. He says the word and the wind and the waves stop. Some skeptics say there is no doubt that Jesus healed some people, because it was the power of suggestion. He didn't *really* heal people, but just touched them and made them feel so much better about themselves that they felt better. This is actually serious teaching by major scholars. Allegedly, Jesus never healed anybody but He was such a magnetic, popular person that His touch had a healing effect on people, which restored them to society.

I'm sure it was encouraging to the leper to be touched, but I don't think a touch is going to make an objective disease go away. And even if we can explain away healings we cannot explain away commanding the wind and the waves! Jesus talked to inanimate objects and they obeyed. Jesus talks and nature obeys. The miracle sets Him apart. Jesus also heals people with demon possession. He heals people to reverse the effect of sin (for example, His healing of the paralytic). He heals intractable problems, (for example, the woman bleeding for year after year and the little girl who had died). He can do it all.

Luke 8:28-34 shows us a power encounter between Jesus and a demon. This was a severe case of demon possession. The man was almost totally consumed and deranged by his demon possession. He has no clothes, no home, and is driven into solitary places no one can visit (Luke 8:29). He lives among tombs, an unclean place suggesting his total alienation from society. He cries out, he falls, he shouts. Chains can't hold him. He seems to have superhuman strength. He has no name. His only name is Legion, a name that suggests alien power like a Roman legion holding him. Mark's Gospel says he gashed himself with stones.

The episode also shows how foolish demons are. Don't give demons too much credit. The demons approached Jesus and said, “Stay away from me.” It makes no sense to approach Jesus just to tell Him to stay away. They also begged and pleaded, shouted and demanded: “What is there between me and You?” “Leave me alone.” “Have you come to torment us before the time?” “Please don't bother me.” They quiver before Him, “Please don't send us into the abyss!” but they also say, “Leave me alone, leave me alone! You have no business with me, go away.” They seem to know who Jesus is. They call Him the Son of the Most High—a title from Luke 1:32—which indicates that they have some knowledge. But if they really know He is the Son of the Most High, why do they think they can manipulate Him? Are they trying to use His name to control Him somehow? They beg not to be tortured before the time. They know there is a time. They just hope it isn't there yet and they try to cut a deal. “Don't throw us into the abyss, the lake of fire, where Satan and his demons will go according to the

book of Revelation. Send us into the pigs.” Jesus says, “Alright, I’ll let you go into the pigs.” And then, irony of ironies, you have pigs running into an abyss—a water abyss.

The main point of the story is that the demoniac is changed. He was driven about, now he is sitting. He was naked, but now he is dressed. He was in the tombs, but now he is at Jesus’ feet. He was so deranged, he didn’t even know his name, but now he is in his right mind, restored to normal, saved and made whole.

The people in that region could not even go near where he lived because it was too dangerous. After the healing, do you suppose the people of that area came by to thank Jesus for taking care of their problem? No, they were afraid and asked Jesus to leave. They asked Him to leave because they understood something: “This demoniac was more powerful than we are. We couldn’t control him, so Jesus must be even more powerful than the demoniac and there’s no telling quite what He will do!”

The demoniac begged to be a disciple but Jesus said “no.” He wanted the ex-demoniac to be His first missionary, almost a proto-missionary: “Go and tell all that God has done for you.” In some ways that’s what the miracles are about. They demonstrate all that God has done. They demonstrate that He has the authority over all things and that He will use that authority, both in His words and His work for the good, for the healing of those who come under His reign.