

Methods for Preaching & Teaching the Miracles (cont.)

It is important to recognize that Jesus' miracles by themselves do not prove He is divine, because there are many people who perform miracles. Miracles prove that someone is an agent of God. The way Jesus' miracles point to His deity is because of what He said when He did them. He alone said, "I forgive you. Now rise." Moses did not do that. Jesus also spoke about His miracles in a different way. He said things like, "I am willing. Be clean. I will heal you." When Moses, Peter, Paul, John, Elijah or Elisha performed a miracle, they were careful to say they were doing so by the power of God. They were always interested in pointing to God. Jesus points to Himself.

One does not have to be a believer to benefit from a miracle. Jesus sometimes healed large crowds. He sometimes healed unbelievers. God is great, and miracles are among His good gifts for the just and the unjust. It is certainly true that sometimes Jesus uses miracles to elicit faith. Sometimes He said, "Do you believe that I have the power to heal you?" and so forth. And He would continue, "As you have believed, let it be for you." So sometimes there is a connection between faith and miracles, but it is not ironclad. Sometimes the miracles stimulate things. Sometime they reward faith. Sometimes they deepen faith. There is a connection, but it is clear they do not compel faith. Sometimes He does not perform a miracle for those whom He knows are settled in their unbelief, like at His trial, or at various times when the Pharisees ask Him for a sign. But Jesus has given them plenty of signs. The connection between faith and signs is not a simple formula that we can spell out, but what they do is point us to Christ. They point us to His comprehensive redemption as Savior of all things.

Miracles also give some hint of what eternity will be like. They give us a picture of redeemed humanity when there will no longer be sickness and tears and darkness and blindness and various forms of suffering. Miracles are a form of restoration. They are not restoration in full, but a foretaste of His restoration. If we are God's agents today, then it is incumbent upon us to strive to bring at least some pale shadow of Jesus' universal healing. Think back for a moment to the story of the leper who was healed, because that was a physical healing as well as a social healing. We need to be in the business of social healing. Jesus did not neglect that aspect of the world in its brokenness and neither should we.

We have to be careful whenever we talk about or encourage the imitation of Christ. One of the most difficult questions for a Christian to consider is when Jesus' actions are models for us to imitate and when they are not. John Murray, in a book called *Principles of Conduct*, said, "To aspire to be like God in one sense is the essence of virtue. To aspire to be like Him in another is iniquity. To preserve this line of distinction is indispensable to all right thinking on the truth and the right."

One of the things we need to do to be faithful to God's Word is to see what is there, and if what is there upsets us, good, we probably need to be upset. If what is there confirms us, then that is good too, because it is good to be confirmed. One of the little things to notice as we study Matthew, Mark, and Luke that might upset us is that sometimes one Gospel looks a little bit different from another. How many demoniacs did Jesus encounter—one or two? Who came to ask Jesus for the healing of the son of the centurion—the centurion himself or the representative of Jewish leaders, who wanted to put in a good word? I am not upset by those things. If you ask me what we would see if a video camera was actually rolling, I would probably say the Jewish emissaries came on the centurion's behalf because it is common to understand that when your representative does something for you, then you do it. For example, we might say the general conducted a successful campaign against his opponent, even though the general did not do it by himself. He gave orders and his troops did it for him. That is just the way we talk.

Admittedly, there are times when the differences between one Gospel and another are not that simple. Even in those cases, we do not presume that the Bible is in error. But it is fair to ask about or investigate those small differences. There are various explanations for the differences we find in the Gospels. Some people say that Matthew, Mark, and Luke have a lot in common because they share two sources. The two sources are Mark and what is sometimes called 'Q,' which is just an abbreviation for a French word meaning 'source.' Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have one basic narrative: Jesus was born, performed miracles, ran into some opposition, taught disciples, was crucified, and then raised. Those aspects are in common among the Gospels and in fact their order in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is very similar. It is argued that the similarity is because Matthew and Luke are simply copying Mark. The other similarity between Matthew and Luke is some sayings of Jesus. Thus things like the Sermon of the Mount have thirty to eighty words in a row almost identical in Matthew and Luke that are not found at all in Mark or John. Regarding this correspondence, it is argued that Matthew and Luke are making use of a set of quotations, which may have been memorized or written down, which would constitute the Q source. This whole argument is plausible, and I do not want to say it is a ridiculous view, but it certainly has its problems.

One major problem with the argument is that people often say that when Matthew and Luke differ from Mark, they have simply changed his original text. According to that line of thinking, Mark was too rough or there was something that was difficult to understand or accept. For instance, Jesus' emotional life is much more prominent in the Gospel of Mark, and if you read about Jesus being upset or being troubled in His spirit, that is always in Mark; it is not in Matthew or Luke. Maybe that kind of material was troublesome to the early church so Matthew and Luke just changed it. If you make that argument, however, then Matthew and Luke have made possibly arbitrary changes without any historical basis. It implies that Matthew and Luke are not very reliable, and maybe they had an agenda. It may even imply that they were not sure they trusted Mark, and they thought they could do much better, so they just changed his words here and there. Therefore that whole approach creates huge problems regarding the historicity and reliability of the Gospels.

A better approach acknowledges that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all had far more material than they needed to put into the four Gospels. Luke himself says pretty much the same thing. He wrote that he investigated everything carefully in the beginning (Luke 1). John wrote that he selected the things that would bring people to faith, to believe in Christ (John 20:30-31). John says that all the books of the world could be filled with the things he could write about Christ (John 21:25). Consider that one quarter of John's Gospel describes the conversation at one meal, so you get the feeling that John wished he had more time and could have written more. This approach seems better and more likely to line up with the historical reality than saying that the Gospels have two sources, Mark and Q.

Remember too that there were many living witnesses at the time the Gospels were written. There were people who were healed by Jesus and were around. There were people who saw Jesus raised from the dead. Many witnesses of these things were still living in Jerusalem. Matthew himself was an eyewitness. Luke had extensive interaction with Paul and various members of his community. It seems likely that Luke traveled and talked to Peter and others.

So there were many sources with far more information than they could use, and yet, they do look similar. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do look similar for very plausible reasons. One is that they are telling the truth. It is one story and you should expect the Gospels to look similar because the story was the same. The other reason we should expect the Gospels to look similar is because they told the story in each other's presence. Have you ever told a story in front of somebody else? You might tell the story of

some great sports victory, and you say, “It was near the end of the game and the score was five to four.” But your friend says, “No, the score was four to three.” And so you correct yourself and continue, and as time goes on you start to tell it the same way because you can correct each other’s memory of the events. It is not likely, of course, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were running around correcting each other, but the story of Christ was told over and over and it was treasured, so we should expect that story to look similar. And yet, since they were all telling the story for their own churches and for people in different parts of the world—maybe Luke for Gentiles, and Matthew for Jewish Christians, and Mark for Roman Christians—they would report somewhat different things that would be interesting and valuable to that community.

The story of Jesus calming the storm provides an opportunity to look at the variations that can be found between the different Gospel accounts. Some small differences can be noticed between the accounts. One says Jesus had a pillow, the others do not. One says He was asleep in the stern, the others do not say exactly where. Did it take place during the day or the evening? It is never called night, but rather day or evening. None of those differences are particularly striking or troubling. If you pay attention to the dialogue, however, you may notice some seemingly important difference. In all three accounts, it is clear that the disciples are distressed, but in Matthew they only say three words in the Greek: “Lord,” “save,” and “we perish.” In Mark, however, they are recorded as saying, “Teacher, do you not care if we drown?” In Luke the disciples are again only given three words in the Greek; they say “Master” twice, and then “we perish.”

It is obvious that the disciples have the worst portrayal in Mark, because it seems like they are accusing Jesus. It is as if they want to say with their last breath that they are mad at Him. In Luke they look a little better, if only because the word “Master” sounds a little better. The word that Luke uses, *epistates*, means ‘absolute Lord.’ It is a strong word that may imply the idea that Jesus could do something about it. Matthew’s dialogue sounds a little better than Mark’s, a little worse than Luke’s. There is a sense of an entreaty: “Please save us.” But they still say they are perishing. In all three, they think they are going to die, and in Mark’s they are mad because they are going to die.

There is another difference in the chronologies presented by the three authors. In Matthew, Jesus first speaks to the concerns of the disciples and then He commands the storm to be calmed. In the other two Gospels, Jesus first calms the storm then He speaks to the disciples. This is an obvious difference, even though in each case He speaks to the disciples. In Matthew’s account, it seems as though Jesus is trying to teach His disciples something, as though He wants them to think about what he is about to do before He does it. In the others, the sense is more of a rebuke for their lack of faith, as though they should have known better.

There are a few reasons why Matthew, Mark, and Luke might tell the story differently. First of all, Jesus and the disciples were speaking in Aramaic, so these are all translations. Second, it is quite likely that they were saying lots of things. They were probably shouting and carrying on and they probably said, “Do you not care if we perish?” and “Lord, save us, we perish!” and “Master, we are perishing!” and “The boat is going down!” and “God save us!” and they probably said dozens of other things. It is also extremely likely that Jesus said a wide variety of things both before and after He calmed the storm. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke together, there are only a few dozen words; He probably said much more than that. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are selecting things from this one episode that fit their main thrust: Jesus is Lord. Jesus will protect us from the destroying forces of nature. He is omnipotent and can control nature by a word.

Along with that main point, the Gospel writers allow Jesus to make other points with His words. Notice Jesus' words in Matthew: "You of little faith." That is exactly what the disciples are in Matthew; they have enough faith to say "Lord" and enough faith to say "save" but not enough faith to refrain from saying, "We are perishing." The lesson is that there is no reason to fear when Jesus is with you. The lesson of Luke is similar but not the same. Instead of using the words "little faith" he records Jesus' question, "Where is your faith?" The question implies that they have faith, but it is not operative. It is a question that we can apply in our own lives as well. Mark, on the other hand, is the Gospel that is hardest on the disciples, on those who should know and do not. But Jesus' words still express some hope. Jesus does not say, "I am mad at you because you have no faith." He says, "Do you not yet have faith?" The hope is implicit: they do not have faith yet, but they will have it eventually. From that we learn to face up to our lack of faith and our need for a real transformation.

We have in Matthew, Mark, and Luke one story of Christ's power. It is one story of His provision retold so that slightly different needs and slightly different challenges of the disciples are expressed. In that way, we can all identify with what is going on. On the whole, Matthew is the Gospel written especially for people who do have faith but they are in the process of growing. Mark is the Gospel that is most apt for people who need to take a good stark look at the failure in their life. Or maybe it is for people who have seen something in the others but know in their hearts that they are not really believers. They can look at the disciples who are just not getting the point, but have a word of hope, and identify with them. And Luke is a little bit in between, at least in this particular place. It is for those who know they have faith and want to walk with God, but are not applying it. For those of us in that state, Jesus poses the question, "Where is your faith?" Find it; practice it; apply it to the situation at hand.

After looking at this or any miracle, it is common to ask the question, "Do miracles take place today?" To answer, we first need a definition. A miracle is a direct, unmediated act of God in the external world in which He works outside the common course of events to reveal Himself, to authenticate His servants, to manifest His nature for His purposes. First of all, it is a direct act. The rising of the sun and the birth of a child are wonderful things, but they are not miracles. They are wonderful providences. And a miracle must be something God does directly in the external world. So when somebody repents or there is an answer to prayer, that is wonderful, but they are not miracles. A miracle cannot be a private event; it demands attention from the external world. And when miracles happened in Bible times, they verified that somebody was a servant of God. If someone claims to be a prophet, and he does a miracle, then his claim is verified. Jesus made certain claims about Himself, and they are verified by His miracles. His works proved that God is redeeming His people and doing something in human history. If that is the definition of a miracle, then miracles like that do not take place today, because there are no prophets or apostles who need to be authenticated as servants of God. So if people are healed, and if miracles take place today, they are not identical to what the prophets and the apostles of Jesus did.

I do want to maintain, however, that what I call small-end miracles do take place, and those are things that demand attention in the external world. Those kinds of things are unmediated. They do not take place through miracle workers, but rather they take place through men and women whom God chooses to use. For instance, I have been there when several people were radically healed by God after I have said, "Let us ask God to heal." God healed then and there, but that does not make me a miracle worker. I do not even claim it is a miracle. I do not know if it will ever happen to me again. It is very different from the way Jesus or John, Moses or Elijah were able to prove that they were sent by God for a particular purpose.