

UNDERSTANDING THE MIRACLES OF JESUS

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How can we profit from the miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospels? It seems obvious. Miracles ought to make us pause before the awesome power of God. They are also meant to encourage us to have faith in Jesus Christ. The same Jesus who acted with such mercy and power then is able to save us now (Hebrews 13:8).

Yet the miracles in the Gospels do not have the same effect on everyone. They have been attacked and twisted in many directions. We ought not to be surprised about this. A person's state of heart affects how he hears the Word of God. If people are hard-hearted or proud, they twist the Bible and it becomes their downfall. But to the humble the Gospels open the way of salvation (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). Let us see how this works when people read the Gospels.

Religion, not science

First, people commonly reject the miracles in the Gospels because they do not believe that miracles are really possible. They believe in "science" they say. But authentic science is just a summary of the regularities in God's usual ways of governing the world. It cannot forbid God from acting in unusual ways whenever he chooses.

Actually, these people have swallowed the modern assumption that the universe is governed by chance and by impersonal laws, not by a personal God. They are relying on a religious

assumption, not a scientifically justified conclusion. They find a chance universe comfortable because inwardly they want to escape being responsible to God and being threatened with judgment.

Theology, not fiction

A second unbelieving approach to the Gospels is to treat them as edifying fiction. For example, the story of the healing of the blind man in Luke 18:35-43 makes the theological point that Jesus is merciful to those who ask him for help. Since the story makes this point, it must have been invented by the early church for this purpose, so liberals say. The story for them is good theology, but it is fictional rather than historical.

Evangelicals, in reaction, have rightly insisted that miracles really happened. But we have sometimes wrongly eliminated the theological purposes of the Gospels. When this happens, there is an underlying assumption at work. Both sides are assuming that history and theology are mutually exclusive.

According to the Bible, the real events in history are not theologically empty. They are events in which God works out his own purposes. According to God's own plan, the events of the Gospels are full of redemptive significance. God guides the human authors of the Gospels to draw out their significance. Hence real history and real theological significance go together.

Miracles look ahead

A third problem arises when we read the Gospels as if they had a message for us alone, an individualized lesson about our devotional lives. For example, Jesus' healing of a blind man (Luke 18:35-43) is a picture of the spiritual truth: Jesus will heal us from sin if we come to him in faith, acknowledging him as Messiah. This is true and important. But it is not all that there is to the story. We need to notice as well several other things.

1. Jesus' action is a sign that Old Testament prophecies of redemption are coming to fulfilment (see Isaiah 35:5; Luke 7:21-23).

2. In the Old Testament blindness is a symbol of spiritual unbelief and lack of understanding. The Old Testament never provided a final remedy. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection provide the power of drawing people to him (John 12:32).

3. All the miracles of Jesus point forward to the great climatic miracle of reconciliation in the crucifixion and resurrection. It is from these events above all that we receive spiritual sight.

4. Jesus' works of healing foreshadow the healing of the whole universe, in a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus' resurrection body is the great guarantee that we will be finally and completely healed from sin and thus from illness and suffering. The small healings during Jesus' earthly life are all pointers to this final greatest healing.

Seven ways to read a miracle

People, who look for spiritual lessons as they read about the miracles, will learn and grow, but they will not always receive everything that God has to give them. God, in his wisdom, has set in motion a programme as deep and wide as the world itself. We will never exhaust its riches. When we read about a miracle in the Gospels, we need to appreciate these riches. We can pay attention to the following:

1. how the story shows fulfilment of the Old Testament;
2. how it shows the power of God in the physical world;
3. how it testifies to the deity of Christ;
4. how it shows the effect of the anointing of the Holy Spirit in Christ's ministry (Luke 4:18);
5. how it points forward to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ;
6. how it applies to our spiritual lives;
7. how it points forward to the second coming of Christ and the full cleansing of the world.

Too often people have imposed their own assumptions on the Gospels, rather than letting the Gospels come to them with full richness. We need to encourage one another to leave behind the sinful assumptions of false world views and to stretch our spiritual horizons as we read the Gospels again.