



When Jesus Speaks: Through His Miracles - Intertestamental Period, Week 1

The Miracles of Jesus are rooted in the last voice of the O.T. 400 years prior:

Malachi:

Malachi speaks to the hearts of a troubled people whose circumstances of:

- Financial insecurity
- Religious skepticism. (Is God real? How do we worship Him if He is?)
- Personal disappointments
- Relationship troubles (Marriage! Family!)

As a community devoted to God, God's people enjoy His protection and intercession.

But failure to live right before God (failing God) and our fellow man (failing one another):

- Natural consequences
- Supernatural consequences
- Intervention of God's judgment (Judgement is a tool of correcting our focus).

But before God would hold Judah in the balance of judgment, He would grant one last call for repentance; a **forerunner** would precede Judgement Day.

400 YEARS of Divine Silence

- After Malachi delivered his message around 450 B.C., no prophet spoke to Israel with God's voice for nearly **five centuries**.
- Israel lived in a great void
- Anchored to the past by the Scriptures
- Struggling to deal with changing conditions as sages and rabbis sought to determine how God's Law should be applied in an age when Gentiles ruled and **ten times** as many Jews lived outside the holy land as within it.
- Israel's response was to organize their society to incorporate ALL they've been told in O.T. Mixing religious life and civic life.
- During the intertestamental period, Judaism was undergoing changes as the Jewish people transitioned from Persian rule (539 BC–331 BC), to Greek rule (331 BC–167 BC), to Jewish self-rule within the Roman Empire (167 BC–63 BC), to assimilation under the Roman Empire (which began in 63 BC).

The time between the closing of Malachi and arrival of John the Baptist. The events that happened in these 400 years had a purpose.

Alexander the Great (334BC)

Aristotle was his tutor.

Brilliant leader. Army = Traveling City

Jewish people were living under the rule of the Persian Empire.

Aramaic became the common language in Palestine.

Jewish people were dispersed all over the Mediterranean world.

Alexander swept thru Palestine in 332 BC

Treated local religions with respect

Greek culture became prominent: Education. Physical development. Athleticism. Art. Philosophy.

Common Greek became common language in the conquered world.

Jewish culture adopted this mindset and ALL Hebrew boys would be taught to read scripture in Hebrew.



Division of Alexander's Empire after his death:

- Macedonia by the Antigonids
- Egypt/Libya by the Ptolemies
- Syria/Persia by the Seleucids

Under the **Ptolemies**, Palestine experienced peace = Political independence, self-sufficiency, prominence and leadership.

Found Self Sufficiency = Political Independence

Land was considered the King's possession (Think Parables here)

Portion of bounty was paid to the King

Jerusalem became a temple state governed by a high priestly aristocracy.

Seleucids seized Palestine. (Antiochus leader)

Needed the good will of Jewish people because war with Rome would be happening

Antiochus promised the people relief from taxes and relative freedom.

The Jewish population in Alexandria, Egypt and the population in Jerusalem began to be strained.

Romans flexed their muscles and Antiochus' son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes was sent to Rome as a political hostage so Antiochus could stay 'in charge' (basically a tax collector for Rome).

Seleucus IV (187-175BC)

Raised taxes – so the power of the Jewish state in Egypt grew in standing against this

Tried plundering the temple, person he sent (Heliodorus) to do this said he was stopped by "supernatural beings".

Heliodorus decided to kill Seleucus and take his throne.

Antiochus the IV (175BC) (Seleucus IV brother) was released by the Romans.

Raised an army, killed Heliodorus, and took control.

He recognized Roman military authority. (Never opposed them.)

Supported the Greek civil community/beliefs.

He had little knowledge or respect for Jewish beliefs.

Maccabean Revolt (Oniads vs Tobiads)

Onias III (rightful Zadokite High Priest) was being called to answer charges of disloyalty (175BC).

His brother, **Jason**, was to come and support him but decided to bribe Antiochus to make him the priest.

Without the Jewish authority to do so, Antiochus agreed to do this anyway.

Jason sent the \$ with **Menelaus** (Tobiad). He decided he should be high priest and Antiochus agreed even though Menelaus was not of the priestly line.

Antiochus tried to win over Rome in Egypt (169-168BC) but was sent home.

He ran out of \$ to pay Rome. So he plundered the Jewish temple.

Oniads were outraged.

The Tobiads encourage him to make Jerusalem more Hellenized.

God should be called Zeus Olympius in the temple.

Erected his own altars.

Swine were sacrificed on the altars.

When officers tried to enforce these rules in Modein, Mattathias killed a fellow Jew who complied.

Killed the officer who made him. Tore down the altar.

Matthias took his 5 sons into the wilderness to live.



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The Hasidim (pious ones) joined them.

Matthias dies and his son, Judas the Maccabee (hammer), takes leadership

Guerrilla warfare ensued (knowledge of land, local support, surprise attacks).

They won a truce with Syria and began to cleanse the temple

They did not know what to do with profaned items so they removed them until a prophet would rise up to tell them.

Cleansing was done and a celebration was created (Hanukkah: Festival of dedication)(164BC)

Antiochus IV was killed and Judas the Maccabeus had enough clout to force the Syrian commander to make peace. THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OF THE JEWISH NATION WAS OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED.

Seleucus IV emerged as new 'king' and he appointed Alcimus (descendant of Aaron) as high priest.

So ends the first stage of revolt. It was a success.

Jonathan (Judas' brother) took control of the Judea after his death (**161BC**).

Negotiating strengths brought them ever closer to independence from Syria.

Alcimus (high priest died) and seat sat empty for 7 yrs

Eventually, Jonathan was appointed even tho not qualified.

High priesthood continued to become more and more politicized.

145BC Simon (Jonathan was murdered) last of the Maccabean brothers, took leadership of Judea.

1. Emergence of Hasidim. ZEAL for the traditions of their ancestors and obedience to Torah.
2. Religious and Political freedom was tasted. (Wanted Jesus to do this again)
3. Sensitivity to ANY threat to the law or the temple.
4. Concentration on the Law > Pharisaism
5. Apocalyptic literature flourished Apocalyptic literature flourished. Daniel and the many apocalypses of the Pseudepigrapha (see Intertestamental Jewish Literature) testify to the importance of apocalyptic thought during the Maccabean period. Apocalyptic writings taught that history was following a determined course and that after a terrible tribulation, which would come shortly, God would intervene and bring history to an end. The apocalyptic writings were generally written in the name of one of the ancient heroes of Israel (Enoch, Abraham, Baruch). They employed symbolism, animal imagery, tours of heaven, a developed system of angels, and a call for endurance and obedience. **The Revelation of John is deeply indebted to the apocalyptic literature of this period.**

Apocrypha (pg. 121)

Because the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha were composed centuries (and sometimes even millennia) after the lives of the Old Testament characters and events that figure in them, it is highly unlikely that they preserve any significant information about the periods they purport to describe. **Their main value is therefore in the evidence they give about the time period in which they were written, not the periods they claim to describe.**

The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha provide information about the history, culture, religious life, literature, hermeneutics, and theology of the period of time between the writings of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament Apocrypha and the writing of the Christian Scriptures, as well as the first couple Christian centuries. They often reflect theological developments in Second Temple Judaism that illuminate the Jewish viewpoints seen in the New Testament.

6. Maccabean era gave Judaism a vitality that enabled it to make its two greatest contributions: Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism.

Maccabean Revolt:

Greek Culture: One language. Teaching and training. Culture trains a society. (i.e. Poland)

Roman Culture: Organized society. ROADS. Safety for travel. Wealth?



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- Show that despite being repeatedly conquered and ruled by other nations, the Jewish people continued to be zealous for their religion—even under persecution.

“The Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only and not be beneath,”
Moses had promised (**Deut. 28:13**).¹

Miracles break this 400 years of “silence” (mindsets were created as well as civic structure):

- God’s silence is broken by John the Baptist’s declaration of Jesus’ miraculous birth.
- His miracles force us to say “yes” or “no” to Him.
- They authenticate His ministry.
- They reveal His character.

1. Jesus turns water to wine.
2. Jesus heals a nobleman’s son.
3. Jesus provides a great catch of fish.
4. Jesus heals a demoniac in a synagogue.
5. Jesus heals Peter’s wife’s mother.
6. Jesus cleanses a leper.
7. Jesus heals a paralytic.
8. Jesus heals a cripple at Bethesda.
9. Jesus heals a withered hand.
10. Jesus heals a centurion’s servant.
11. Jesus raises a widow’s son.
12. Jesus stills a storm.
13. Jesus delivers a demoniac in Gedara.
14. Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman.
15. Jesus raises Jairus’s daughter.
16. Jesus heals two blind men.
17. Jesus casts out a dumb spirit.
18. Jesus feeds 5,000 people.
19. Jesus walks on water.
20. Jesus heals a Syro-phonician girl.
21. Jesus heals a deaf and dumb man.
22. Jesus feeds 4,000 people.
23. Jesus heals a blind man.
24. Jesus delivers a demonized boy.
25. Jesus provides money in a fish’s mouth.
26. Jesus heals a man born blind.
27. Jesus heals a woman bound by Satan.
28. Jesus heals a man with dropsy.
29. Jesus raises Lazarus.
30. Jesus cleanses ten lepers.
31. Jesus heals Bartimaeus.
32. Jesus curses a fig tree.
33. Jesus replaces Malchus’s ear.
34. Wonders at Calvary.
35. Jesus provides a catch of fish.²

The discoveries found in the ten miracles we’ll explore are presented in an order that parallels what must be any disciple’s journey toward spiritual maturity and fruitfulness:

- What kingdom values (as opposed to worldly attitudes and norms) does the miracle reveal?
- With those truths in mind, how should our beliefs change?
- How then should our actions change?

These steps can (and do) happen concurrently when we study God’s Word, as we trust Him more fully, follow Him more closely, and fulfill His purposes by His grace and power. But it all begins with a God-given “Spirit of wisdom and revelation” that “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened” (Eph. 1:17–18). That’s always the ongoing miracle.³

¹ Richards, L. (1998). [Every miracle in the Bible](#) (p. 150). Nashville: T. Nelson.

² Richards, L. (1998). [Every miracle in the Bible](#) (pp. 163–165). Nashville: T. Nelson.

³ Newton, D. (2018). [Fresh eyes on Jesus’ miracles: discovering new insights in familiar passages](#). Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.



1

Got Wine?

Turning Water into Wine

John 2:1-11

If God is able to turn water into wine, why don't we see more cases of transformation in people and circumstances?

John 2:1-11 The Wedding at Cana

2 On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8 And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. 9 When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." 11 This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

- Only John's Gospel tells this one
- John picks only 7 miracles of Christ to list. WHY?
- Because they pointed to Jesus' Divinity and His unique Mission
- Jesus has the power to Transform

The Wedding:

- The entire community attends
- Requires a Master of Ceremonies – a Governor if you will
- Running out of wine =
- The ask by Mary...how panicked was she?
- Yet despite her desperation, Jesus seemed unmoved. Let's read on: "'Woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. 'My hour has not yet come'" (John 2:4).
- Jesus was putting things in proper perspective. He knew His mother wanted Him to use His supernatural ability to fix the problem, which He knew would reveal something about His amazing identity. But was it time for that?
- Mary: "to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons" (vv. 5-6).
- Foot washing water?
- What did the servants think of Jesus' instructions?
- They did what He asked.
- Results = Lots of fourstar wine. Standing of family in community was raised.

Why is John including this as the first Miracle? What is he telling us about Jesus and His power?

- The power to Transform
- The power of listening to what Jesus asks. (What if the servants did fill the jars? What if they only filled them 1/2way? What if they were tired from doing that once already that day? What if....they didn't listen.)
- Yes, Jesus could have turned a thimble of water into thirty gallons of wine. But John reported a miracle not of multiplication but of transformation. **Jesus intentionally "revealed his glory"** (v. 11) by changing the quality not the quantity of the substance brought to Him. He could have snapped His fingers and created enough wine for a thousand weddings, but He chose to remedy the wine shortage by telling the servants to bring to Him what needed to be changed.



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Notes:

I pastored for years in southern Kentucky, where the humid summers make you sweat like a cold glass of sweet iced tea. This was usually not a problem, provided you could go from your air-conditioned home to your air-conditioned car to your air-conditioned workplace to the air-conditioned store.

But on too many occasions I had the misfortune of performing weddings in non-air-conditioned churches chosen for their quaint ambience. Funny how the allure of ambience wilts as the congregation waits for the bride's entry. Every bride wants a perfect wedding day. Did no one think the lack of air conditioning might be a distracting discomfort? Oh well . . .

Some things are the same in all places at all times. Weddings need to go well. That's why even two thousand years later we can relate to the first miracle the apostle John recorded in his gospel. It occurred during a wedding in Cana. The problem at this wedding was not drenching humidity but the disappointing lack of celebratory wine.

Before we delve into the miracle and discover something you may never have thought about, it's important to realize that this miracle holds a special place in the New Testament Gospels. Only John's gospel tells it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke for some reason did not include it. On top of that, John handpicked just seven miracles out of scores he could have chosen. He did so because his mission differed from the other gospel writers'. The few miracles he chose ranked at the top of all Jesus' miracles, because in John's mind they were not just supernatural wonders. They were "miraculous signs" pointing to Jesus' divine identity and unique mission.

John chose this miraculous sign to be the first—the leadoff hitter for his whole story of Jesus' glory. We can only guess why. But what could be a better start to the gospel of Jesus than to show Him to be the one who can do miracles of transformation? Isn't that what everyone needs?

John started by saying, "On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine'" (John 2:1–3).

Notice those last five words Jesus' mother spoke. Don't just read them. Imagine them. What did she sound like when she voiced them? Certainly she wasn't flat and emotionless like a computer speech synthesizer: "They . . . have . . . no . . . more . . . wine."

Imagine her tone of voice. Her volume. Her intensity. A little cultural background might help inform your imagination.

In those days, wedding celebrations were major events that often lasted several days. You think wedding planners today have a chore? Imagine having the job of "master of the banquet." Some translations even call that person the "governor of the feast" (KJV). A wedding celebration was no small affair if it required a governor to be in charge!

With so much riding on a wedding celebration attended by the whole town, you can imagine the potential outcry if things went poorly. **In fact, according to historians, running out of wine at a wedding celebration was grounds for a lawsuit! And you thought we live in a litigious society?**

That's why worry and a shot of desperation probably resonated in Jesus' mother's voice. Perhaps she pulled Jesus aside and whispered it, but there would have been a lot of force behind those words, like a pressure valve releasing pent-up steam: "They have no more wine!"

If you, like me, grew up in a teetotaler home, running out of wine would cause great relief not grave consternation. So I wonder what would give me a similar level of concern, considering my upbringing. Here's the best I can do: What if they ran out of wedding cake, the kind I love piled high with frosting? I imagine myself attending a wedding in the humid Kentucky heat . . . and trapped in a church basement after the ceremony, waiting uncomfortably, dress shirt sticking to the back of the chair . . . longing for—no, praying for—the good fortune of getting a corner piece of cake adorned with a creamy confection rose. Then finally getting to the buffet table and finding they've run out of cake! Yes, I would be considering a lawsuit! Or maybe something even worse involving that cake knife!

Somehow that imagined scenario puts me in a place where I can hear Mary's panic when she cries, "They have no more wine." Yet despite her desperation, Jesus seemed unmoved. Let's read on: "'Woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. 'My hour has not yet come'" (John 2:4).

How would you like to get a Mother's Day card addressed "Woman"? Maybe that was a respectful form of address in Jesus' day, but He still sounds reluctant to help. Is He really being unsympathetic? Probably not. He was making a theological point. When He referred to "my hour," He was not talking about clock time. The word used here refers to a "special moment." He typically referred to His eventual death on the cross this way.



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~~Jesus was putting things in proper perspective. He knew His mother wanted Him to use His supernatural ability to fix the problem, which He knew would reveal something about His amazing identity. But was it time for that? Shouldn't He reserve that revelation for a greater display of glory than solving this wine shortage? I can almost hear Him say, "I came into this world to save much more than one wedding." That's where He was probably coming from when He replied to His mother.~~

Amusingly, Jesus' mother didn't seem to wait for His reply before she was off rounding up the servants. After all, she was His mother. She knew her boy. She didn't need to wait for an answer before assuming He would help. John recorded, "His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons" (vv. 5–6).

Remember that fact given about the stone water jars. We'll come back to them.

Jesus ordered the servants to fill the jars with water and then take a sample of the water to the master of the banquet. When they did that, the feast master, not knowing the whole story, enjoyed what he considered a fine glass of wine. But that puzzled him: "Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, 'Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now'" (vv. 9–10).

Not only did Jesus convert water into wine, but it was not the boxed variety! This wine would impress the snootiest waiter at restaurants where common people can't even afford to pay for parking.

Think about that. Jesus took water, which consists of only two elements: two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen (H₂O). Not only did He remix those two elements, but He also added the element carbon. We know that because the natural sugars in wine grapes include carbon. And He introduced many more compounds that never existed in the water. Wine includes tannins and organic acids: tartaric, malic, and citric. In short, He didn't just sneak some red food coloring into the water when no one was looking. **He somehow accelerated the aging process and turned two minutes into years, as far as the wine was concerned.**

Without even waving His hand or whispering "Abracadabra," Jesus performed a **miracle of radical transformation**. Only the God who created the universe from nothing could have infused the one-time water with carbon and acids and sparkling flavor. If He could do this to water-filled pots, imagine what He can do with worry-filled people. Imagine how He can create unexpectedly high-quality wisdom or faith or peace where none exists.

Isn't this the basis of our hope, our only hope—that God performs miracles of transformation? So let's return to the teaser question at the head of this chapter: If God is able to turn water into wine, why don't we see more cases of transformation in people and circumstances?

The answer emerges when we backtrack to the command Jesus gave the servants and note their response. Remember, Jesus told them to fill the waterpots. Picture those waterpots. Recall that each one held twenty to thirty gallons of water, so they were about the size of a standard galvanized trashcan, except made of stone.

How would the servants have fulfilled Jesus' command? Would they have pulled out the garden hose, attached it to a house spigot, and lopped it over the top? Probably not.

Would they have carried the waterpots to the town well, filled them, and lugged them back to the festivities? Thirty gallons of water weighs about 250 pounds, and that's on top of the weight of the stone waterpots themselves. No way would even two people be able to carry such a heavy, sloshing, unwieldy container. Even a donkey cart would have proved pointless no matter how hard you tried to keep the pots steady and level over the rough paths.

So how would they have filled the waterpots? By carrying small buckets back and forth from the well, probably located some distance away, over and over again until the pots were full.

I'm a pretty hard worker, but the idea of hauling water back and forth in little two-gallon animal skin buckets would not have been a pleasant thought. Bear in mind I probably had already filled those waterpots earlier in the day.

What would I have done? What would you have done? We should not zip right past this question in order to get on with the miracle story. I got out my calculator and estimated it would have taken about eighty trips back and forth to obey Jesus' command. Or perhaps only forty trips if using a neck yoke for carrying two skins at a time. Either way, the task was time consuming and labor intensive.

If I had been a servant in this story, I might have filled the first waterpot to within a couple inches of the top, thought *That's good enough*, and started filling waterpot number two. I would have filled that one to within perhaps three or four inches of the top, thought again *That's good enough*, and started in on waterpot number three. I would have filled pot three to within five or six inches. . . . You see where I'm going? My enthusiasm to fulfill Jesus' command would have been draining out even as I was filling the waterpots, until maybe—maybe—the sixth and



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final waterpot would have been about half-full when I decided to draw one more bucket and a final conclusion: *That's good enough.*

However, here's the shocking observation about the text. John carefully pointed out that the servants "filled them to the brim" (John 2:7). Most servants in this culture could choose how they went about their work, like employees in our day. That's why in several places the New Testament urges Christian servants to work diligently and with good attitudes as an act of worship and witness. I must confess the servants at the wedding were more thorough and diligent than I would have been. But what difference does it make whether they filled the waterpots to the maximum level?

Here's the difference. Imagine my sixth half-full waterpot containing only fifteen gallons of water compared with the actual servants' completely full waterpot. How much wine would I have gotten? Fifteen gallons. How many gallons of wine would they have gotten? Thirty. If I had brought five gallons of water, how much wine would I have gotten? Five gallons. Do you see the point?

~~Yes, Jesus could have turned a thimble of water into thirty gallons of wine. But John reported a miracle not of multiplication but of transformation. Jesus intentionally "revealed his glory" (v. 11) by changing the quality not the quantity of the substance brought to Him. He could have snapped His fingers and created enough wine for a thousand weddings, but He chose to remedy the wine shortage by telling the servants to bring to Him what needed to be changed.~~

Only Jesus could have performed the miracle of transformation. He took H₂O and made an elegant combination of elements, tannin, bouquet, and color—from water to fine wine—without touching, adding, mixing, or blending any additional ingredients. But the amount of water that was transformed depended on how much water the servants brought. Had they brought less water, less would have been transformed.

That's the lesson for us. It turns out that the old gospel song has been right all along: What a Friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry, Everything to God in prayer.

Why don't we see more transformation in people and circumstances? The amount of wine we enjoy depends on the amount of water—things that need to be changed—we bring to Jesus, particularly when brought in the waterpots of prayer. How many gallons are you bringing?

Documentation and analyses of spiritual revivals throughout history reveal that prior to these events, people "filled [the waterpots] to the brim" with prayer. What is true of widespread revivals is true of restored marriages, rescued addicts, redeemed prodigals, and rejuvenated hope: prayer should be thorough to the point of nearly overflowing. Whatever needs to be transformed, take it to Jesus in prayer. And do not stop until you experience an incredible transformation either in your world or in how you see it.

It will be like getting the corner piece of a wedding cake over and over again.

20/20 Focus

1. In Scripture, miracles often include some human involvement. Can you think of other biblical examples when human involvement contributed to the occurrence or impact of a miracle? What does that reveal about God's purposes? Why do you think He'd want us contributing to His miracles?
2. What more do you need to bring to Jesus to be transformed in prayer?
3. Have you ever truly considered how much forfeited peace and needless pain we suffer from not bringing "everything to God in prayer"? Why do you think you have had a hard time filling the waterpots with prayer?
4. Is there something else you saw in this story that changes the way you understand it?

Lord, I thank You that You alone can utterly transform any resource, any situation, or any person into something brand new, exciting, and more fitting to Your purpose. Forgive my lack of trust and when I withhold things, try to fix my problems, and attempt change myself or my situations without looking to You first. Help me fill my life up with prayer to the brim. Amen.

Vision Check

The study technique this chapter employed involves more fully imagining yourself in the story. Ask, *What would I have been experiencing in this situation?*

Read Genesis 12, which tells of God's promise to Abram to make him the father of a great nation. Put yourself in Abram's situation as an elderly man with a barren wife. What might you have been thinking had you been in his place? Write down what insights come to mind and, using dougnewton.com or the Fresh Eyes app, compare them with a few that came to my mind.



John 4:46-54

Jesus Heals an Official's Son

⁴⁶ So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. ⁴⁷ When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Unless you^[a] see signs and wonders you will not believe." ⁴⁹ The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. ⁵¹ As he was going down, his servants^[b] met him and told him that his son was recovering. ⁵² So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour^[c] the fever left him." ⁵³ The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household. ⁵⁴ This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

Thinking: Why is this the 2nd Miracle John lists? Answer when done.

The Hollow Men by T.S. Elliot

**Between the idea
And the reality
.....
Between the conception
And the creation
.....**

**Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
.....
Falls the Shadow**

18 mile journey

- When did the man leave his home to go see Jesus?
- Events span two days
- When did the man leave home to go find Jesus? Why would he? Why not send a servant in case the boy roused and he had lucid moments with his dad?
- 6 hour journey by quick stepping it.
- He found Jesus and asked.
- Jesus spoke.
- What did the man hear?
- Man went home right away?
- Nope, the next day. Why did he wait?
- The dad took Jesus at His Word...means???

In that moment, you are not hearing him claim to have performed a miracle. You're hearing a report from someone who you believe has the necessary experience and knowledge to give you accurate and authoritative information. He knows what he's talking about. That's what puts you at ease. You take his word and depart for some supper in the hospital cafeteria.

- Does this mean the man got saved? That he believed in Jesus?

John, our gospel writer, was very clear that the man did not actually "believe" in Jesus until *after* receiving word about his son's recovery. Wait a minute! If he didn't even believe until then, what was going on when he "took Jesus at his word and departed" (v. 50)?

The greatest demonstration of God's deity is His ability to create everything by the power of His word. That's who He is. That's what He does. His words are not just informative; they are **performative**. Divine words spoken long-distance from over eighteen miles away had caused the terminally sick boy to recover.

God's Word Perform His Will

God's words **always accomplish His purposes (Isa. 55:10-11).**



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- His words **create faith (Rom. 10:17)** and **cause spiritual rebirth (1 Pet. 1:23)**.
- They **discern and expose our inner thoughts (Heb. 4:12)**.
- They **cleanse (Eph. 5:25–26)** and **sanctify (John 17:17)**. His words can **be in us so we bear much fruit (John 15:7-8)**
- And thankfully, His words **defeat the Enemy of our souls (Eph. 6:17)**.

Thinking: Why is this the 2nd Miracle John lists?

NOtes:

Time Will Tell
Healing the Royal Official's Son
John 4:46–54

A/DA Sometimes you have to forget what you've always heard in order to see what you've never seen.

I once heard a renowned astrophysicist boast on a morning news program that he and other colleagues can now describe what happened at the beginning of the universe to within the first few billionths of a second. He admitted those first couple of billionths were still a mystery. However, perhaps expecting pushback from committed theists in the audience, he quickly asked people not to get him wrong. He was not saying there is no God; he was just saying that with respect to the origin of the universe, there was nothing for a god to do.

In other words, from his point of view, astrophysics did not automatically contradict the first few words of the Bible: "In the beginning God . . ." (Gen. 1:1). For all science knows, a Supreme Being might have been present in the beginning, but He was merely an arms-folded bystander. I won't even begin to bombard this scientist's claim with the host of classic philosophical arguments for God's existence as Creator. I simply ask you to consider that immeasurably brief moment just before the beginning when there was nothing and then there was something.

Is it really possible for something—energy or matter—to come out of nothing without the causal action of a nonmaterial entity? In another context, in his poem "**The Hollow Men**," **T. S. Eliot** wrote about an inscrutable shadow between the possibility of something existing and it actually occurring.

**Between the idea
 And the reality

 Between the conception
 And the creation

 Between the desire
 And the spasm
 Between the potency
 And the existence

 Falls the Shadow**

People who trust Scripture's testimony believe God's Word sheds light on that shadowed moment just as the universe began. Whatever you may believe about the timing of creation events, Holy Scripture declares one paramount fact: the only true God created everything by the power of His word.

Keep this in mind as we focus on the miracle of Jesus healing the royal official's dying son. But first, to see this text with fresh eyes, you must paradoxically and intentionally put yourself in the dark. Sometimes in order to see what you've never seen before, you have to forget whatever you've heard before.

Think of it this way. When you watch a movie with a surprise ending the second time, you can no longer be surprised. You probably won't watch with rapt attention as you did the first time. You might even go get a snack while the movie still plays, because you know you won't miss anything. In the same way, we tend to read familiar Scripture passages with less than rapt attention. So the secret to approaching this and many other familiar passages



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is to pretend you've never read it before and you don't know how it turns out. That's hard to do, but as you will see in this case, everything hangs on *not* knowing what you already know.

This miracle began with a royal official whose son was dying in Capernaum, a town about **eighteen miles** from where Jesus was staying in Cana. In a last-ditch attempt to save his son's life, the royal official sought out Jesus to ask Him to go back with him and heal his son. That's as far as we should go now or else we will start dragging in ideas we need to forget. You'll see what I mean later.

Detective Work: The ETD and ETA

Our task is to reconstruct this miracle's timeline the way detectives try to solve a crime. So let's hunt for time references in the story. Here's what we find: "When he [the royal official] inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, 'Yesterday, at one in the afternoon'" (John 4:52).

Notice there are two key reference points. The word *yesterday* tells us the story spans two days. Each day involves one key event. The first day—let's call it Monday—is the day the royal official found Jesus and asked Him to come heal his son. That happened at what Jews of that day would have called the "seventh hour," which is equivalent to our 1:00 p.m. At that moment, Jesus said to the man, "Go, . . . your son will live" (v. 50). Then sometime on the second day (Tuesday) "while he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living" (v. 51).

Simple enough. However, the timeline reveals more we need to reconstruct, things not explicitly spelled out in the text. If we make a couple reasonable assumptions consistent with the facts of the story, you'll be surprised at what we discover.

We need to ask the following two questions: When did the man leave home to go find Jesus? And when did the man head back home after meeting with Jesus? The first question is the most important to our fresh insight. When did the man leave home?

Let's assume he felt a sense of urgency and left home early in the morning on Monday, the same day he found Jesus. **Why? Could be to protect himself from the dishonor of losing a male descendant. Yet this is the second of only seven miracles John reported, and he elevated love throughout his gospel. So maybe John was moved by this desperate love for a son, a man not wanting to leave his child's bedside any longer than necessary.**

I remember the day my mother died. She was in hospice. All the signs pointed to death within just a few hours. So my wife and I simply waited by her bedside. She was not conscious and most likely never would regain consciousness. Nevertheless, there was no way either of us was going to leave her bedside. It's a very human desire to be present in those last moments. And what if she did rouse and we weren't there for her?

Now transport that fact into this story, along with the more compelling reality that the key persons are a young boy and a father who would do anything to save his son. For the father, the idea of leaving his son's side, of *not* being there in case he roused for a few minutes, would have been unthinkable. Unless . . . there was a slight possibility . . . a last hope?

Put yourself in the father's place. He heard that Jesus—who many people assumed was some kind of prophet with healing powers—was in Cana. What are you going to do? You're going to leave your suffering son, conscious or unconscious, and make the trip as quickly as you can to try to bring help. But you would do everything in your power to return as quickly as you could. That's what the father must have had in mind. So when did he leave for Cana to find Jesus? It's reasonable to assume he did not leave until Monday morning. The facts located in both the text and in the geography of the area support that theory.

Capernaum, where the boy lay dying, was eighteen miles from Cana, where Jesus was. Walking at a steady pace, the father could be in Cana in about six hours. Admittedly, we who live in an automobile culture might find the prospect of walking eighteen miles daunting. But the father's culture was pedestrian. People were used to walking. True, eighteen miles is still eighteen miles. But hey, who cared? His son was dying!

If we assume he left Monday morning, a six-hour trip would put him in Cana—you guessed it—right around the "seventh hour" (adding a little time for him to locate Jesus once he got into town). Fits the text, doesn't it?

Detective Work: A Hidden Delay

Now let's add to the timeline, and you'll see something puzzling. The man and Jesus had a brief conversation that couldn't have taken more than two or three minutes. Here's what Scripture records: "When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to



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death. 'Unless you people see signs and wonders,' Jesus told him, 'you will never believe.' The royal official said, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' 'Go,' Jesus replied, 'your son will live'" (John 4:47-50).

After that brief exchange it was probably about 1:05 p.m. What did the man do next? Remarkably, the text says, **"The man took Jesus at his word and departed" (v. 50).**

At this point the text rushes us right along, and we tend not to pause and put two and two together. The next verse says, "While he was still on the way . . ." (v. 51). If we read too quickly, we picture the man leaving Jesus and immediately heading home. But that's not what he did. How do we know? **Because he didn't meet his servants on the road until the next day.** This is incredible! He did not rush right home. He could have made it. It was only 1:05. Yes, he had already walked eighteen miles that day, and another eighteen would have been a challenge. But again, who cared? His son was dying!

If I were in that situation I would glance at my watch, calculate when I could get home, realize I could be there before nightfall, take into consideration that it would be an easier and quicker trip being a downward slope from Cana to Capernaum, and would have hightailed it. Within a mile of home, I would have quickened my pace even more, probably breaking out into a sprint when I neared my street and saw my house in the distance. Then I would have burst through the front door, breathlessly shouting, "Is he alive? Is he alive?"

Yet a loving father who went to desperate lengths to seek Jesus' help on the chance He would drop everything and come heal his boy didn't head home on Monday. He waited around Cana until Tuesday morning with no email or phone to check on his son. His hope rested in Jesus' word, and he took it to heart. That's remarkable faith! I'd love to have that kind of confidence in Jesus' reassuring words. But hold your horses; you know too much. It's not the kind of faith we think it is. Let's move on.

Detective Work: Delayed Belief

There's one more crucial observation. Notice the father's reaction when he met the servants on his way home: "While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, 'Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him.' Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he and his whole household believed" (John 4:51-53).

~~John, our gospel writer, was very clear that the man did not actually "believe" in Jesus until after receiving word about his son's recovery. Wait a minute! If he didn't even believe until then, what was going on when he "took Jesus at his word and departed" (v. 50)?~~

~~Now is the time to forget what we already know about what happened. We know (because we've seen the movie) that Jesus healed the boy long distance. The royal official did not know that. Jesus did not say, "You may go; I will heal your son long distance." All Jesus said was, "Your son will live" (v. 50).~~

~~How would the royal official have understood what Jesus meant? In the same way you understand a doctor who comes into the waiting room after performing critical surgery on your loved one. He walks in, you put down your magazine and lean in for his report, and he says, "You can all rest easy. The surgery went fine. Your dad is doing well. You can see him in a couple of hours."~~

~~In that moment, you are not hearing him claim to have performed a miracle. You're hearing a report from someone who you believe has the necessary experience and knowledge to give you accurate and authoritative information. He knows what he's talking about. That's what puts you at ease. You take his word and depart for some supper in the hospital cafeteria.~~

That explains the father's reaction to Jesus' words. Jesus, widely hailed as a prophet-healer, informed the royal official that his son would live. The father was hearing a prediction from someone who he believed had the authority to give accurate information about the future.

"Wow! I thought for sure my son was going to die. Everything pointed in that direction, but Jesus said he will live. That's great news! I can relax. I'll wait till morning to head home."

But then on his way, somewhere along the dusty road from Cana to Capernaum, he saw through the shimmering heat the wavy images of figures coming toward him. He was genuinely surprised when he drew close enough to recognize his own servants coming his way. I imagine this conversation:

"What are you guys doing here?"

"We had to bring you the news about your son."

"What news? Is he still alive? Did he die? What?"

"He's alive and all better."



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“All better? Jesus said he would live, but he’s better already? I thought it would still take a while, considering how sick he was.”

“No. He’s totally better! Up and eating. Normal.”

“Wow! When did that happen?”

“Oh, about one o’clock yesterday.”

“Yesterday? About one?” He drops his head and pauses to calculate, when it dawns on him. “I can’t believe it!” He looks back toward Cana. “Jesus healed him when He said the words!”

Now, returning to the text, things begin to make sense. We modern readers have seen the movie. We know Jesus healed the boy when He pronounced the words, “Your son will live.” But the royal official had no reason to think that. **He’d thought the words were prophetic, but he knew then that they were power.** It was then, and only then, that this royal official with a Jewish upbringing believed. Why then? Because for any Jew with even nominal faith, one distinguishing characteristic set the true God apart from all other pretenders to the universal throne: **our God causes things to happen by the power of His words.**

I can almost hear the father putting two and two together. “The true God said ‘Let there be light’ and there was light. Yesterday at one o’clock Jesus said, ‘Your son will live,’ and my son lived.” At that moment—and it could not have been until that moment—the father realized Jesus’ identity as the Son of God not just a prophet of God, and he believed.

Performative Words

Now that we have created the timeline and discovered what it reveals, let’s back up from the story and collect ourselves. I’m almost breathless myself! This miracle unveils something we moderns hardly appreciate. **The greatest demonstration of God’s deity is His ability to create everything by the power of His word. That’s who He is. That’s what He does.** His words are not just informative; they are **performative**. Divine words spoken long-distance from over eighteen miles away had caused the terminally sick boy to recover.

We must adopt a higher view of the Word of God than we often do. We need to approach the Bible believing it is more than a repository of accurate and authoritative information. It is that, of course. But too often we stop there. We milk its instruction, principles, precepts, and eternally true information for all they’re worth and try to live according to them. That’s right and good. But God’s Word is more than that. **God’s words perform His will.**

It has always been that way, and so it shall remain. **God’s words cause everything that counts. God’s words created everything (Gen. 1) and sustain everything (Heb. 1:2–3).** He is not a grand watchmaker, as the deists claim, who created the material universe that now functions by fixed laws independent of His faithful involvement. If He ever was to stop speaking His will for this universe to exist, at that very moment everything would stop existing.

God’s words **always accomplish His purposes (Isa. 55:10–11).** His words **create faith (Rom. 10:17)** and **cause spiritual rebirth (1 Pet. 1:23).** They **discern and expose our inner thoughts (Heb. 4:12).** They **cleanse (Eph. 5:25–26)** and **sanctify (John 17:17).** His words can **be in us so we bear much fruit (John 15:7–8).** And thankfully, His words **defeat the Enemy of our souls (Eph. 6:17).**

One day my wife and I received a phone call about a thirtysomething lady who, although a devoted Christian, suffered frequent bouts of depression and spiritual attack as a result of her childhood exposure to her parents’ and grandparents’ satanic practices, including human sacrifice. She needed help breaking free from recurring, debilitating torment, so we arranged to meet with her. We followed no preconceived formula—indeed we had never encountered anything like this before. My wife felt strongly impressed prior to our session to use a specific psalm at a key moment and asked the lady to read it aloud through her empty eyes. As she did, an oppressive, almost visible cloud of sadness lifted. Her torment immediately departed, but the proof of her freedom played out over the years of a stable life of peace and joy.

Experiences like that of the royal official and this tormented woman have a way of helping us know what happened in the first moments of time.

God spoke. He still speaks, and good things happen.

20/20 Focus

1. Can you give an example of another occasion when Jesus caused something miraculous to happen by simply speaking words?
2. Reflect on the difference between the royal official taking Jesus at His word and his eventual believing in Jesus. Though he didn’t initially grasp Jesus’ identity, ponder how trust in Jesus begins as seeing Him as One who gives accurate and authoritative information. Could you do a better job of taking Jesus at His word? How so?



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3. Consider two ways to approach God's Word: as *informative* (gives accurate life information) or *performative* (causes God's will to happen). How do you tend to relate to Scripture most often? How might you relate more effectively to God's Word as performative?

4. What Scripture might you pray performatively?

Lord, I know my words have no power in themselves, but Yours do. I want to take more seriously the potential I have for effective prayer and ministry. Help me trust and employ the performative nature of Your words as provided in Scripture. You promised if I remain in You and Your words in me, I can ask whatever I wish and it will be given (John 15:7). Show me more about how to live in that promise. Amen.

Vision Check

Creating an accurate timeline is often difficult, as biblical narratives compress time, so we miss the actual time frame involved. It's important to walk through a story "stretching out" the events to their full length.

Read the story in Acts 12 of the apostle Peter's miraculous release from prison. You will find this vague verse: "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him" (v. 5). There is no clue how long the church prayed before Peter was released. Imagine their prayer gatherings and how long they might have waited, given their disbelief when they were told Peter was at the front door. Write down your ideas and compare them with those shared on dougnewton.com or the Fresh Eyes app.



3

Dayworkers

Peter Healing the Lame Man

Acts 3:1–11

Acts 3:1–11

The Lame Beggar Healed

3 Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.^[a] 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. 3 Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. 4 And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Peter Speaks in Solomon's Portico

11 While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's.

Would you stand on your head in a local convenience store if it meant someone might be saved? What gets you out of bed in the morning? This question is commonly asked in job interviews these days. Potential employers are not looking for smart-aleck replies like "The alarm clock" or "The smell of coffee" or "My noisy kids." **They hope to hear what motivates you in your daily tasks.** Nondiscretionary obligations make up 90 percent of life. We must work, eat, pay bills, go grocery shopping, take care of the kids, mow the grass, wash clothes, maintain the car, etcetera. And the etceteras keep etcetering. Interviewers know that. They want to know whether you, as Henry David Thoreau expressed in his classic book *Walden*, are trying to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" instead of letting life suck all the marrow out of you. What moves you?

Unfortunately, many people do not have a good answer. We would like to think Christian believers are uniquely blessed with motivation. After all, Jesus promised us an abundant life of purpose, joy, and camaraderie. The sad fact is, however, many Christians are sad. They may not be suffering from clinical depression (though some are), but they still live with nagging feelings of depression.

Many things can cause this common malaise, one being a lack of meaning. Human beings, created in God's image, are wired to work with God. The apostle Paul affirmed that fact when he wrote, **"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).** Jesus identified a paradox of the kingdom when He promised that reinvigorating soul rest would result from working in tandem with Him. **"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," He said, "for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:29).**

It stands to reason, then, that we human beings suffer intrusive anxiety and emotional inertia when we lack a sense of divine purpose, one that gives meaning to all our activities, both discretionary and nondiscretionary. No prescription or brief high can bring the satisfying peace and joy divine partnership brings.

Many studies over the years have demonstrated the benefit of meaningful work as an effective antidote to depression. How much more effective that work can be when it occurs alongside the One who designed you to join in His work.

What gets you up in the morning? To see how Jesus wants to use you that day is a pretty good answer and a better stimulant than caffeine. But is that your answer? And is that really how it works? Can we—should we—expect to have a sense of daily employment with the Lord? Are we to live like dayworkers, waiting for the Lord to drive up and take us into the harvest field every morning?



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Let's go to a wonderful, well-known miracle **the Spirit of Jesus performed through Peter and John** for some insight into these questions: the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:1–11). We'll look at it with fresh eyes, and the insight will come when we eventually notice two often-overlooked words.

The Significance of "Every Day"

A man, crippled all his life, legs tucked motionless under him, sat right at the entrance to the temple—the gate called Beautiful. **Someone carried him there** every day. Acts records why, saying, "Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts" (3:2).

Because he was crippled from birth and was now over forty years old (4:22), he probably had seniority among beggars and perhaps could lay claim to prime real estate for begging. Everyone entering the temple for prayer was motivated to do one last act of almsgiving to get on God's good side just before praying.

So he was hopeful when Peter and John stopped—he didn't know they were *the* Peter and John—and asked him to look up from his beggar's habit of lowering his gaze and make eye contact. He thought, *All right! Someone's going to make a show of their giving.* (We know from Jesus' critique of the Pharisees that they were prone to prideful charity.)

So the man looked up but heard a very disappointing opening line from Peter: "Silver or gold I do not have . . ."

He probably thought, *Oh great. You have no money—plus, you have a very strange way of saying it. "Silver or gold I do not have. Silver or gold I do not have."*

". . . but what I do have I give you . . ."

Oh great . . . What? Are you going to give me a little "God loves you" sticker?

"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (3:6).

You probably know what happened next. He did just that. This guy who had never stood upright in his life, whose point of view was always staring up into people's nostrils, suddenly looked another human being eye to eye. It took just a moment for the liquid in his inner ear to slosh around and for him to find his balance, but then he took his first step, something his parents had waited forty years to see. Probably because he watched with envy all those years as people walked past him, he had studied the motion and imagined doing it himself. So it took him only a minute to mimic that image and begin walking, then running, then jumping and praising God!

But here's the question: **Why did Peter stop and offer him healing on that particular day?** Luke specifically said **the man was placed there "every day" to beg and everyone recognized him as the one who always sat outside the gate. That phrase "every day" gets overlooked, but it is very significant. For Luke told us in the previous chapter that the disciples went to pray "every day" at the temple (Acts 2:46). That means day after day they walked right past the man and did nothing. Why on this day did they stop?**

The Scanner

I think the explanation that best fits the text is the Spirit of Jesus gave them a direct instruction. How can I be so sure? Maybe on other days Peter and John were caught up in conversation, or other things occupied their minds, so they walked past without noticing. That happens to us all the time. We stride right past human needs all around us. Then, occasionally, we aren't so preoccupied and happen to notice. So maybe on this day Peter just happened to notice the guy and had a moment of sympathy. Why not *that* explanation? **Because moments of sympathy don't produce such extreme confidence.**

Look at Peter's actions after telling the lame man to get up and walk, and notice the order of the verbs: "Taking him by the right hand, he *helped* him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles *became* strong. He *jumped* to his feet and *began* to walk" (3:7–8).

Peter commanded him to walk, then reached down to take him by the right hand and help him up before he saw any evidence of healing. Peter didn't command him to walk but then ask a diagnostic question: "Are you feeling any tingling in your legs?" He was so sure of the man's healing that he reached down and pulled him up. Only then, according to the text, did the man's legs and feet become instantly strong. Only some direct instruction from God's Spirit could have persuaded Peter to risk lifting up the crippled man *before* seeing any evidence of healing.

Perhaps we wouldn't interpret Peter's experience this way so quickly had we not read about a parallel experience Jesus had that provides a helpful precedent. In John 5, Jesus entered a hospital-like setting of infirm people gathered around a pool of water thought to occasionally provide therapeutic benefits. Apparently, people believed angels invisibly stirred the water from time to time and whoever entered the water first was healed.

Rather than offering His healing powers to everyone there, Jesus approached only one person (which was out of character for Jesus) and initiated a conversation that led to the man's healing. The similarities between this



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miracle and Peter's miracle are striking: this man was also crippled for nearly forty years; Jesus, like Peter, offered healing without the man asking; and Jesus similarly commanded the man to get up and walk. Later when the Jews asked Jesus to defend His Sabbath-breaking act of healing the man, Jesus explained: "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (v. 19).

In short, Jesus claimed to be acting from an ability to perceive spiritually His heavenly Father's will and activity. Probably that acute sensitivity resulted from His daily regimen of prayerful communion with the Father. Peter and the other apostles were also following that regimen, according to Luke's description of their lifestyle post-Pentecost. Luke said, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

These disciples who, as far as Scripture records, never asked Jesus to teach them to heal or preach or cast out demons but made only one educational request—"Teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1)—demonstrated that Jesus' example of daily prayer had penetrated their hearts and rearranged their priorities. So it is no wonder and makes great sense, given the parallels between the two healings, that Peter was similarly perceptive of the Spirit's spontaneous instruction on that particular day.

I wonder whether an expectation that the Spirit might instruct at any moment was the norm for the early believers. Think about deacon Philip in Acts, who got his start in ministry helping organize the food distribution for Greek widows within the church (6:5). His spiritual gifts and ministry skills apparently expanded to the point that he became a dynamic evangelist when the gospel spread beyond his home church in Jerusalem. Acts 8 records him having an experience of spiritual instruction. It states, "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it'" (vv. 26–29).

The timing was perfect, as only the Holy Spirit could have known, for the eunuch to encounter someone who could lead him to faith in Jesus. So the Spirit dispatched Philip on the spur of the moment, and as soon as the evangelistic encounter bore fruit, Philip was transported away by the Spirit just as spontaneously (v. 39).

Remarkable.

I'm not sure who, but sometime in Christian history someone decided to make most of us believe that spontaneous ministry instructions simply don't happen today, at least not as a general rule. Whoever it was convinced us to relegate such experiences to the class of "rare exceptions." Based on what argument, I don't know. The fact that it rarely happens? Just because most people do not forgive offenders seventy times seven does not mean it is an invalid expectation and should not be a common experience for all Christians.

I am not saying a person receives spontaneous ministry instructions from the Lord every day. **Yet people who stay in prayerful communion with the Lord and who believe He may occasionally give specific ministry instructions are likely to receive those instructions quite frequently, because they stay "tuned in." It's like living with a police scanner turned on.**

I can bear witness to this fact and have many stories to tell. Like the time I was spiritually "informed" to travel to a distant city to lead a man I didn't know out of the sin of adultery. When I obeyed, with an understandable amount of trepidation, it turned out he had just prayed that morning for God to send him "a Nathan" (the prophet who confronted King David about his sin of adultery with Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 12:7) to help deliver him from that sin. Like David, the fellow I sought out was set free from his sin and found forgiveness. His marriage and family were saved from destruction, and he became a friend and coworker for many years.

Stories like this abound throughout Christendom today. Like the time God's Spirit told a woman to leave a church meeting and turn out of the church parking lot in the opposite direction from her route home. Not knowing why or where she should go, she sensed that she should pull into a local convenience store. When she entered, the craziest thought struck her mind: *Go up to the cashier and stand on your head.* More than likely, most of us would have stopped right there and rushed home. But she did it! The cashier burst into tears and explained how despondent he had been about life and how he had just told God that evening, "If You're real, have someone come in here and stand on their head in front of me."

I'm not suggesting you start practicing headstands. But why not move as close as you can to the Lord every day? The world is no less full today than in Bible times of people who desperately need to know God is real and His compassion is incredible. Why wouldn't God want to dispatch His people like you and me far and wide and often to



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prove His love and offer His grace? Most of the time we can probably offer that love and grace without special instructions. The Bible does a great job showing us how to do that in general terms. But there will be times, many more than we think, when God wants to give us the joy of offering His love in just the right way at just the right time with just the right words. What a privilege when you get to be part of that partnership.

That will get anyone out of bed in the morning!

20/20 Focus

1. Considering a person's sense of meaning comes largely from engaging day-to-day in God's purposes, on a scale of one to ten (with ten being very meaningful), how meaningful does your life feel currently? Why did you assign that number?
2. The chapter's key point is based on the assumption that Peter and John passed by the lame man frequently, an assumption supported by the use of "every day" in Acts 2:46 and 3:2. What other repeated phrase in those same verses supports that main assumption? And why?
3. **God occasionally wants to employ us in His work by giving specific instructions. But most Christians hesitate to act because they doubt their ability to hear God accurately. What might we do to avoid the problems of hesitation or false impressions?**
4. **Can you think of a time you acted on a "sense" of a divine instruction? Or maybe a time you chickened out? (We all do it.)**

Lord, I certainly don't want to be arrogant or presumptuous about my ability to hear from You. But I am convinced You want to employ me in Your work and occasionally give me specific instructions. I am open. Guide me. Guard me. Use me. I want my days to count for You. Amen.

Vision Check

Little kids possess an insatiable need to ask the question "Why?" That question was the key to the insights in this chapter. You'll be surprised at what you might discover when you rekindle that childlike habit. Why did Jesus or the disciples or some other character do what they did? Why then? Why that way? (Though this requires imagination and speculation, start with clues the text/context provides and the Bible as a whole supports.)

Go to another story of Jesus healing a lame man: John 5. Jot down the basic facts and then start asking why about everything that transpired. Don't forget to read the immediate context before and after the healing. See what new insights come to your mind. Then hop on dougnewton.com or the Fresh Eyes app to compare your thoughts with mine.⁴

⁴ Newton, D. (2018). [Fresh eyes on Jesus' miracles: discovering new insights in familiar passages](http://dougnewton.com). Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.



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CHAPTER 9

JESUS: A MAN MARKED BY MIRACLES

GOD WITH US

Matthew—John

- **MIRACLES SURROUNDING JESUS' BIRTH** ([MATTHEW 1-2](#); [LUKE 1-2](#))
- **THE MEANING OF JESUS' MIRACLES**
- **HISTORY'S THIRD OUTBURST OF MIRACLES**
- **LEADERS' RESPONSE TO JESUS' MIRACLES** ([MATTHEW 12:22-24](#))
- **THIRTY-FIVE MIRACLES DESCRIBED**
- **A DEATH-DEFYING MIRACLE** ([JOHN 4:46-54](#))
- **A DEMON IN THE SYNAGOGUE** ([MARK 1:21-28](#); [LUKE 4:31-37](#))

No one in first century Judea thought of Jesus as an ordinary man. Some today attempt to cast Jesus as a simple visionary or a misunderstood but good man. But one phenomenon forced even contemporaries who were hostile to Jesus to hesitate. Jesus was a Man marked by miracles!

The people who witnessed the healings performed by Jesus had no doubt that they were seeing miracles. Some reacted with fear. Others responded with faith. The miracles made one thing perfectly clear. Jesus could not simply be dismissed as insignificant. Every person, now as then, must make a decision about the claims of this Man marked by miracles.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries Israel had experienced divine silence. After Malachi delivered his message around 450 B.C., no prophet spoke to Israel with God's voice for nearly five centuries. Israel lived in a great void, anchored to the past by the Scriptures, struggling to deal with changing conditions as sages and rabbis sought to determine how God's Law should be applied in an age when Gentiles ruled and ten times as many Jews lived outside the holy land as within it.

Yet Israel's hope was never extinguished. One day God would send the Messiah, the Anointed One promised by the prophets. Then the entire promised land would be occupied by a new Jewish state, and Israel rather than Rome would dominate the world. "The Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only and not be beneath," Moses had promised ([Deut. 28:13](#)). In the coming messianic age, Israel would once again be obedient to the Lord, and the Lawgiver's ancient promise would be fulfilled.

GOD'S SILENCE IS BROKEN

Then the silence of God was broken. Rumors of angel annunciations kindled Jewish expectations, and these simmered for nearly thirty years. Then a prophet whose dress and lifestyle reminded Israel of Elijah appeared out of the desert. He preached repentance, called for public baptism as a sign of confession and recommitment, and warned Israel to get ready—the promised Messiah was about to appear.

For the first time in nearly 500 years, a prophet's voice was heard again in the Holy Land. John the Baptist had begun his ministry, preparing the way for Jesus, the Christ.

John's ministry reached its peak one day by the Jordan River. He had preached his fiery message of moral renewal, warning that judgment would follow hard on Messiah's heels. But that day John's cousin, Jesus, came to him for baptism.



When Jesus Speaks: Through His Miracles - Intertestamental Period, Week 1

John refused at first ([Matt. 3:13–15](#)). He knew his cousin Jesus well, and John’s message was addressed to those who had strayed from the Law. “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” John objected (v. [14](#)). There was nothing in Jesus’ life to confess—nothing that required the radical change of heart that John preached. Indeed, Jesus’ life was more pure than John’s!

Jesus insisted that he be baptized. “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness,” he said, meaning that it was only right for him to be baptized and take a stand with John to affirm the prophet’s message. So John agreed. And on that day, John witnessed a miracle seen only by himself and Jesus (compare [Matt. 3:16–17](#); [John 1:29–34](#)).

Earlier God had revealed to John that one day he would see the Spirit descend and rest on someone—and that this person would be the Messiah ([John 1:33](#)). “I didn’t know him,” John later confessed, perhaps distressed that he had not realized that his own cousin was the One. But as Jesus came up from the Jordan’s waters, John saw the Spirit descending as a dove. He heard a voice from heaven announce, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” ([Matt. 3:17](#)). And John bore witness to what he had seen. “I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God” ([John 1:34](#)).

Then the truly unexpected jolted religious leaders and commoners alike. As Jesus began his public ministry, a new age of miracles came. Within the span of about three years, miracle after miracle was witnessed by thousands. Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus multiplied resources. But while Elisha had fed a hundred with twenty loaves, Jesus fed thousands on far less! Like the two ancient prophets, Jesus raised a child who had just died. But then Jesus raised Lazarus, an adult who had been in the grave for three days!

Unlike any prophet in sacred history, Jesus even healed the sick. He restored withered limbs, gave sight to men born blind, and even expelled demons. The miracles of Jesus surpassed the miracles of the prophets of old. Even those most hostile to Christ and his message were forced to confess that he actually did work wonders.

MIRACLES MARK JESUS’ BIRTH

The mark of miracles, which set Jesus apart, surrounded His birth as well as His public ministry. Both Matthew and Luke record several such wonders. Blending the two accounts, we can identify no less than thirteen miraculous signs associated with Jesus’ birth and early years.

Gabriel appeared to Zacharias ([Luke 1:11–22](#)). While an aged priest named Zacharias was offering incense in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that he and his wife would have a son. The son was to be named John, and the angel announced that he would be the forerunner of the promised Messiah. Many things about this incident bear the mark of the miraculous.

He was chosen to offer incense by lot ([Luke 1:8](#)). The ordinary priests who ministered in the temple were divided into twenty-four orders, or groups. Each order served for just two weeks a year in Jerusalem. There were so many priests in each order that only once in a man’s lifetime might he have the privilege of offering incense at the time of morning or evening prayer. God saw to it that Zacharias was chosen by lot that one special time.

Elizabeth, his wife, was barren ([Luke 1:7](#)). The text emphasizes the fact that both Zacharias and his wife were old ([Luke 1:7, 18](#)). The implication is that both were too old to have children normally. As in the case of Abraham and Sarah, it took a special work of God to quicken Elizabeth’s womb so that John could be born.

The birth would fulfill prophecy ([Luke 1:17](#)). The last words of Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament, predicted the coming of an “Elijah” who would turn the hearts of God’s people to the Lord, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The angel announced that John, the child to be born to Zacharias and Elizabeth, would fulfill this promise-prediction.

Zacharias was struck temporarily dumb ([Luke 1:20](#)). Zacharias doubted the angel’s promise, and as a consequence he was struck dumb until the child was born and named. When he left the temple, observers realized that he had seen a vision which had literally left him speechless.

Gabriel appeared to Mary ([Luke 1:26–38](#)). Six months after Elizabeth conceived, Gabriel appeared to Mary. At the time Mary was probably a teenager, since in New Testament times most Jewish girls were married between ages 13 and 15.

The angel announced that Mary had been chosen by God to bear a son who would be the “son of the Highest” and the “Son of God.” Mary was also told that her son would be the Messiah [the son of David] and that “of His kingdom there will be no end.”



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When Mary asked how this was possible, since she had never had sex with a man, Gabriel told her that God the Holy Spirit would overshadow her. The “father” of her son would be God Himself.

Unlike Zacharias, Mary expressed no doubt at this amazing announcement, but instead expressed her submission to God’s will ([Luke 1:38](#)). The touching faith of this Jewish teen-ager in response to the announcement of history’s greatest miracle stands as an example for us today. As a woman of great and wonderful faith, Mary merits our appreciation and deepest respect.

Mary is “with child” by the Holy Spirit ([Matthew 1:18](#)). The announcement to Mary that she would become pregnant even though a virgin came true. Matthew looks back to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah and notes that God had promised that His Messiah would be virgin born. While some have noted that the Hebrew word *almah*, found in [Isaiah 7:14](#), can be translated a “young unmarried woman,” Matthew in translating the ancient prophecy into Greek uses the word *parthenos*, which can only mean a virgin. The “young unmarried woman” of the prophecy was always intended to be understood as an unmarried woman who was a virgin.

There can be no doubt that the virgin birth is one of the premier miracles of Scripture. If it were possible to create a viable fetus using only a woman’s egg, that child would be a daughter, never a son. Only a male can provide the chromosome that, along with the woman’s, makes possible the birth of a son. That chromosome, with the others that formed the theanthropic person Jesus (fully God as well as truly human), was provided by the Holy Spirit.

The virgin birth, predicted in the Old Testament and described in the New, marks Jesus as utterly unique. Like His miracles, as we will see, this beginning set Him apart from sacred history’s prophets and clearly identified Him to Israel both as Messiah and as Son of God.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream ([Matthew 1:19–25](#)). The text of Matthew describes Joseph both as “betrothed” to Mary ([Matt. 1:18](#)) and as her “husband” ([Matt. 1:19](#)). In New Testament times Jewish marriages were contracted in two stages. During the first stage a binding contract was entered into by the bride and groom. This was typically negotiated by the families, and executing it meant that the couple was fully committed to each other. The second stage was the wedding itself, in which the husband took the bride into his own home, to live with him as his wife. The phrase “before they came together” in [Matthew 1:18](#) makes it clear that, while Joseph and Mary were contracted to each other, they were not yet living together.

In this case Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant and naturally assumed that she had been unfaithful to her commitment to him. Her pregnancy was grounds for public divorce and disgrace. Yet Joseph cared for Mary, and while he felt he could not go through with the marriage, he planned to protect her reputation by putting her away “secretly.”

Before this could happen an angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him what Gabriel had told Mary. Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was to marry her, and when the son was born acknowledge him by naming him—a father’s privilege in Israel. The name Joseph was to give Mary’s child was Jesus, the Greek spelling of the Hebrew name Joshua, which in each language meant “Savior.” This Jesus would “save His people from their sins.”

The child in Elizabeth’s womb recognized Mary ([Luke 1:41](#)). Mary was herself pregnant when she went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was carrying the child who would grow up to become John the Baptist. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaped in recognition.

Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit and blessed Mary ([Luke 1:41–44](#)). Elizabeth, without hearing the story of Gabriel’s appearance to Mary, blessed Mary and acknowledged her as “the mother of my Lord.” This wonder must have comforted and encouraged Mary. She was not alone in understanding what God had done within her.

Zacharias predicts John’s ministry ([Luke 1:59–80](#)). When Elizabeth’s child was born, Zacharias spoke and confirmed that he was to be named John. The loosening of Zacharias’ tongue was viewed as a miracle by onlookers. More significantly, Zacharias was then filled with the Spirit and prophesied concerning John’s ministry. John was destined to “go before the face of the Lord” as one preparing the way for the Messiah.

Caesar called for a census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem ([Luke 2:1–7](#); [Matthew 2:6](#)). On its surface, the Roman call for a census hardly seems to qualify as a miracle or wonder. The Emperor Augustus had instituted a policy of having citizens throughout the empire return to their home town to be counted, as a basis for assessing taxes. First century census documents from Egypt show that this policy was followed in lands besides Palestine and Syria.



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Yet this census decree was instrumental in the fulfillment of a prophecy made by Micah some 700 years before Jesus' birth. The decree brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem just in time for the Christ-child to be born in the home town of King David! When events fall together in such a way that prophecy is fulfilled, we surely can call them miracles of Providence. God, behind the scenes, is ordering and timing what happens to fulfill His own purposes and plan.

Angels announced Jesus' birth to shepherds ([Luke 2:8–20](#)). The night Jesus was born angels announced His birth to shepherds in the fields near Jerusalem. The wonderful news was that “there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” ([Luke 1:11](#)).

This familiar part of the Christmas story is far more significant than we normally imagine. Today Christians tend to romanticize shepherds, seeing them as selfless individuals who are symbols of God's own care for His human flock. We do not realize that in the first century shepherds were viewed with suspicion and contempt. They were generally considered to be thieves, and in fact were not even allowed to testify in Jewish courts because their testimony could not be trusted! How appropriate then that the angel appeared to shepherds, first century “sinners,” with the good news that a Savior was born that very night.

What wonderful news that was, for them and for us, for like the shepherds we too need a Savior desperately.

Simeon identified baby Jesus as the Christ ([Luke 2:21–35](#)). Jewish ritual law called for the offering of a sacrifice by the mother after bearing a child. When Mary and Joseph traveled to the Jerusalem temple to offer the sacrifice, they were approached by an aged man named Simeon. God had told Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Christ, the promised Messiah. Simeon was led to the temple by the Holy Spirit, who identified the infant Jesus as the Savior. Simeon held Jesus, and praised God for permitting him to see the one who would save God's people.

Anna the prophetess acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah ([Luke 2:36–38](#)). Anna joined Simeon in identifying Jesus as the promised redeemer.

A star brought wise men from the East to Judea to find Jesus ([Matthew 2:1–12](#)). When the wise men appeared in Jerusalem Jesus was probably about two years old (cf. [Matt. 2:7, 16](#)). Their familiar story is filled with wonders.

The wonder of the star ([Matt. 2:2, 7](#)). People today debate the nature of the star the wise men saw. Was it a supernova, which appeared suddenly in the night sky? Was there a juxtaposition of planets, which gave the appearance of a bright and unexpected star in the heavens? Or was it simply a miracle-star, a bright new light shining above? We have no clear answer as to the nature of the star. But clearly there was an unusual light in the heavens, which the wise men not only recognized but which appeared to move and which in the end led them to the very home where Jesus lived ([Matt. 2:9](#)).

The wonder of the star's identification ([Matt. 2:2](#)). When the wise men entered Jerusalem they asked for the newborn king of the Jews, and stated that they had seen “his star” and had come to honor him. People have wondered what led the wise men to identify the new light in the sky with a Jewish ruler?

We know that Magi—the word rendered “wise men” in our English versions—were a special class of persons in the Persian Empire noted for their encyclopedic knowledge. We also know that a major center of Jewish learning existed from the sixth through first centuries in Babylon, where some of the Magi lived and worked. Most commentators suggest that the Magi of Matthew's Gospel linked the new star with a rather obscure prediction in [Numbers 24:17](#), which reads “A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel.”

While this theory is possible, we simply do not know how the Magi recognized the star as a symbol of the birth of the Messiah, the descendant of David, destined to rule Israel and the world. The appearance of the Magi is one of the wonders associated with the story of Jesus' birth and childhood.

Matthew makes it clear that they did come. They worshiped Jesus and gave him expensive gifts. And then, warned in a dream, they went home without telling Herod where Jesus could be found.

Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt ([Matt. 2:13–15](#)). This wonder too is associated with Jesus' birth and earliest years. King Herod the Great, noted for his fierce attacks on any who seemed to threaten his throne, determined to kill this “king of the Jews” the Magi had spoken of.

The dream warning is not the only wonder associated with the flight to Egypt. In addition there is the prophecy the flight fulfilled ([Matt. 2:15](#)), and God's provision for the journey.



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[Luke 2:24](#) tells us that when Mary came to the temple to offer the required sacrifice after childbirth, she offered “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” According to Old Testament law, the normal offering was a lamb ([Leviticus 12:6-8](#)). Only if the family was too poor to afford a lamb could the woman offer a pair of birds. Joseph and Mary, then, were poor people. Yet it would be expensive to travel to Egypt and live there for any length of time.

The answer, of course, is the gifts given Jesus by the Magi. Each of their expensive gifts could be, and undoubtedly were, sold and the proceeds used to finance the flight to Egypt that saved the Christ child from Herod’s executioners. In this we clearly have yet another wonder of divine providence—striking evidence that God was personally involved in the birth and early life of our Lord.

Jesus was indeed marked by miracles, and His birth and early life were accompanied by wonders that set Him apart from all.

The underlying wonder of the Logos ([John 1](#)). We cannot understand Jesus if we simply treat the events surrounding His birth. The reason for this is simple. While conception and birth mark the beginning of existence for normal human beings, neither conception nor birth were a beginning for the Son of God.

John in his Gospel launches the story of Jesus where his story truly begins. In the first verses of the Gospel of John, Christ is called the “Word,” our English rendering of the Greek word *logos*. That Greek term might also be rendered as the “expression” or “revelation.” John takes us back into eternity, and asserts that in the beginning there was God. And that the Word was with God, and in fact was God. In fact the Word, the eternal expression of God, was the Creator of all, and the source of life and light. It was the Word, the One who has always expressed and revealed God, who came into our world as a human being. It was the Word, the One we know as the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, who bonded with humanity in Mary’s womb, and who was born as a baby, grew into manhood, and began a miracle ministry in which He expressed God’s compassion and love for humankind.

Ultimately it was the Word, the eternal Son of God, who in Jesus Christ found expression in the grand miracle of the Incarnation, who died on Calvary as a sacrifice for our sins, and who was raised again in the grand miracle of resurrection.

It is no wonder that Jesus’ birth and early life were marked by miracles, for He Himself is the greatest miracle of all: God, come in the flesh; God, come to save us; God, calling us to find forgiveness and eternal life in Him.

THE MIRACLES OF JESUS FORCE US TO SAY YES OR NO TO HIM

Studies of Jesus’ miracles often descend into debate about the credibility of individual wonders. The skeptic argues that the miracles weren’t all that special. The sick were about to recover anyhow. The illnesses were psychosomatic—and moderns know how suggestion can bring about amazing cures in such cases. Jesus only seemed to be walking on water; really he was on the shore and the disciples were far enough away so that he *appeared* to walk on the surface of the sea. And besides, the critics claim, the miracle stories were written years later by disciples who were intent on making Jesus into someone he had never been—a deity rather than a Jewish rabbi whose teachings were within the traditions of Judaism.

Even believers sometimes argue the case for Jesus’ miracles on the skeptic’s grounds. The sicknesses described were serious. But no matter how responsive the victim was to suggestion, they reason, no cure of this malady could have been effected by such means. Many modern “faith healers” have been exposed as frauds because they pre-selected those they permitted on the stage and did not permit follow-up studies of their supposed “healings.” Jesus’ healings were different. The Gospel accounts were written so close to these miracle events that there were living witnesses who could have contradicted any lies or exaggerations. And so the debate rages on.

This kind of argument confuses the real issue. Miracle accounts are intrinsic to the message of the Gospels, growing out of the theology of the Old Testament. This theology affirms the existence of a Creator who lives and acts in the world he made on behalf of the people whom he has chosen. The miracles are consistent with the nature of the God of the Bible. A. Richardson states this position strongly:

The history which the Evangelists write is their good news, their gospel. They believed that in Jesus of Nazareth God had spoken his saving Word to the world. If we accept their gospel, we accept the history which they record, and we do not find it difficult to believe with them that the *form* of the revelation which God made in Christ included the working of the “signs” which proclaimed to opened eyes the fulfillment of the age-long hope of the prophets of Israel, the promise that God would visit and redeem his people. If we reject that gospel, we shall inevitably reject the view that Jesus performed miracles, or we shall seek to



explain them away by means of the hypothesis of “faith healing” or other modern theories equally removed from the standpoint of the biblical theology. The truth is that, as we have all along maintained, the miracle-stories are a part of the gospel itself; Christ is to the New Testament writers the manifestation of the power of God in the world, and his mighty deeds are the signs of the effectual working of that power. But in this age the power of God is veiled; revelation is by the gift of faith. It is possible for us to fail to see Christ as the manifestation of the power and the purpose of God; then we shall be content with an explanation of the miracle-stories in terms of modern psychology or folk-mythology. The miracle-stories, as an essential part of the preaching of apostolic Christianity, confront us with the question whether the power of God was or was not revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. They compel us to say Yes or No (p. 126).

THE AUTHENTICATING FUNCTION OF MIRACLE CLUSTERS

As we examine each of the recorded miracles of Jesus, we will see that each had wonderful messages for those who observed it as well as for us today. But it would be a mistake to look at each miracle as an isolated event without considering the significance of the whole. In fact, the one unmistakable impression we gain from reading the Gospels is not that Jesus performed a miracle here and there, but that Jesus’ whole ministry was marked by a concentrated cluster of miracles. And it is the significance of the several concentrated clusters of miracles recorded in Scripture that we must consider first.

The Exodus miracles. The first of these concentrated clusters occurred at the time of the Exodus. These miracles authenticated Moses as God’s spokesman, essential because Moses was commissioned to introduce a new stage in God’s eternal plan. Israel was to be formed into a nation. God’s chosen people were to be governed by a Law revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai.

It was vital that Moses be firmly established as God’s spokesman so the revelation he mediated would be accepted by all. This was accomplished by the ten proving acts—the ten plagues on Egypt.

Note that these ten establishing miracles were followed by a series of supportive miracles. These were performed on the journey to Sinai, and they continued on the journey to Canaan. The establishing miracles, acknowledged by Israel, were followed by supportive miracles which showed the Lord’s presence with his people.

The miracles of Elijah/Elisha. The next cluster of miracles took place in the eighth century B.C. King Ahab had launched an intense campaign to make Baal worship the official religion of Israel. God’s revelation was under attack.

At this critical stage in Israel’s history, Elijah’s miracles—especially the miracle at Mount Carmel—authenticated Elijah as God’s spokesman and re-established the fact that “the Lord, He is God” ([1 Kings 18:39](#)). The earlier revelation given through Moses was reaffirmed, and the wavering population was called back to God.

The miracles performed by Elisha were supportive miracles. Like the miracles on the journey to Canaan, Elisha’s miracles demonstrated the continuing presence of God with the people who would acknowledge him and his word.

The miracles of Jesus. The third concentrated cluster of biblical miracles occurred during Jesus’ public ministry, which spanned only three years. Jesus, like Moses, was the mediator of a new revelation, which unveiled more elements of God’s eternal plan. The miracles of Jesus also established him as God’s spokesman, whose words were to be heard and whose teachings were to be accepted. His establishing miracles had to be significant; they authenticated a messenger whose revelation supplanted and superseded the Law given by Moses.

It was also essential that Jesus’ establishing miracles authenticating the new revelation be followed by supporting miracles. These were necessary to demonstrate the presence of God with those who accepted the new revelation.

Just as the miracles of the journey served as supporting miracles for the establishing miracles of the ten plagues on Egypt; just as the miracles of Elisha served as supporting miracles for the establishing miracles of Elijah—so the miracles of the apostles recorded in the book of Acts served as supportive miracles for the establishing miracles of Jesus. The miracles of Acts demonstrated the presence of God with those who accepted Jesus and the revelation which came through him.



Miracle Clusters as Authenticating Acts

The Exodus Cluster

Establishing Miracles: The Ten Plagues

Moses is God's spokesman.

The revelation given by Moses is God's Word.

Supporting Miracles: The Journey Miracles

God is present with those who receive his revelation.

The Elijah/Elisha Cluster

Establishing Miracles: The Miracles of Elijah

Elijah is God's spokesman.

The revelation given by Moses is God's Word.

Supporting Miracles: The Miracles of Elisha

God is present with those who honor his revelation.

The Jesus Cluster

Establishing Miracles: The Miracles of Jesus

Jesus is God's spokesman.

The revelation given by Jesus is God's Word.

Supporting Miracles: The Apostles' Miracles

God is present with those who receive Jesus and his revelation.

MIRACLE CLUSTERS AND GOD'S SELF-REVELATION

The miracle clusters in Scripture vouch for God's messenger, authenticating the revelation they mediate. But there is another important function of the miracle clusters in Scripture. This function is seen clearly when we separate the miracles of Jesus and the apostles, and include a cluster of miracles which is the subject of unfulfilled prophecy.

The Exodus miracles. The Exodus miracles established Moses as God's spokesman. But they had an even more significant function. This function was stated by the Lord in Exodus, when he explained the purpose of the devastating plagues he brought on Egypt. On the one hand, the plagues were a judgment on Egypt's gods ([Ex. 12:12](#)). More importantly, the miracles were performed so the Egyptians might know that Yahweh is God ([Ex. 7:5](#)) and so Israel might realize that "I am the Lord your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" ([Ex. 6:7](#)).

Israel had known God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the revelation of his personal name, Yahweh, "I AM," was given through Moses at this critical point in sacred history [see pages 176–178]. The Exodus miracles, both establishment and support, affirmed a central truth of Scripture: The Lord is God.

The Elijah/Elisha miracles. When the Elijah-Elisha miracles took place, the people of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, were wavering between Yahweh and Baal. Who was the real God? Whose ways should the Israelites follow?

Elijah the prophet was thrust into this gap. On Mount Carmel he performed a miracle which convinced Israel that "the Lord, he is God" ([1 Kings 18:39](#)). The establishing miracles of Elijah and the supporting miracles of Elisha served as a reaffirmation of the truth that the Lord truly is God and is present with his people.

The miracles of Jesus. The third cluster of miracles was concentrated in the three years that Jesus taught and healed in Judea and Galilee. These miracles established Jesus as God's spokesman and authenticated his message. At the core of Christ's message was the stunning affirmation, "I and My Father are One" ([John 10:30](#)). Jesus had spelled out the meaning of this statement in a controversy with some Pharisees.



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After being ridiculed for his claim of having seen Abraham, Jesus responded, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM” ([John 8:58](#)).

Christ’s listeners understood this claim, and they tried to stone him for blasphemy. Jesus was identifying himself with the Yahweh of the Old Testament! Christ was claiming to be God!

The apostolic miracles. If we treat Christ’s miracles and the apostolic miracles as separate clusters, we make a fascinating discovery. The message of the apostles was that Jesus Christ is Lord (cf. [Acts 2:36](#)). Their miracles were performed in the name of Jesus Christ (cf. [Acts 3:6](#); [16:18](#)). The doctrine that Jesus Christ is Lord was supported by the miracles performed in his name—miracles which proved his continuing presence with his followers.

The end-time miracles. Old and New Testament writers foresaw a concentrated cluster of judgment miracles destined to take place at the end of history. Many of these awesome judgment miracles, which far overshadow the plagues on Egypt, are described in the book of Revelation. Second Thessalonians sums up the impact of this period of righteous retribution. It will be a time when “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” ([2 Thess. 1:7–9](#)).

The self-revelatory aspect of miracle clusters. If we look at these miracle clusters as self-revealing acts of God, we find a fascinating pattern, shown in the chart above. Each cluster of miracles makes a decisive statement about who the God of Scripture is. These statements can be expressed in the form of a chiasm (see page 134).

Miracle Clusters and God’s Self-revelation

A. The Exodus Miracles: The Lord is God.

B. Elijah/Elisha Miracles: The Lord is God.

C. Jesus’ Miracles: Jesus is God.

B. Apostolic Miracles: Jesus is Lord.

A. End-time Miracles: Jesus is Lord.

In this arrangement, the central self-revelation is that of Jesus Christ as God. The other self-revelations support the central affirmation.

The first “A” miracle cluster introduces Yahweh to humankind as God. The second “A” miracle cluster forces all humankind to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and God. Each of the “A” miracles—the ten plagues and the end-time plagues—are miracles of judgment.

The first “B” miracle cluster resolves doubts by offering evidence that Yahweh truly is God, while the second “B” miracle cluster settles doubts by offering evidence that Jesus is Lord. The “B” miracles are miracles of provision.

The central “C” miracle cluster affirms the truth that the God of the Scriptures is Jesus—and that Jesus is the God of the Scriptures.

Viewed in these ways, as both authenticating and as self-revelatory acts, the miracle clusters of Scripture make important theological statements about the Bible’s teaching about God. We cannot treat miracles apart from this theology. If we are to be biblical in our approach to the miracles of Scripture, we must accept them as they are described. If we are asked whether these miracles actually took place, we must answer a confident “Yes.”

The miracles of the Bible are so tightly linked to what Scripture teaches about God that the only way to reject the miracles of the Bible is to reject the God of the Bible.

JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERS’ RESPONSE TO JESUS’ MIRACLES

The leaders’ hostility. As we look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ miracles, we are struck by the fact that the leaders of the Jews remained hostile to Christ in spite of his miracles. How could they be so blind? Were the miracles of Jesus nothing but rumors that an enlightened religious establishment could easily ignore? The answer to that question is evident throughout the Gospels. Christ’s opponents could not and did not dispute that he performed miracles ([John 3:2](#); [9:15–16](#)). How then did they justify their rejection of Jesus as God’s spokesman and his message as God’s Word?



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The leaders' strategy ([Matthew 12:22–24](#)). One day Jesus healed a man who was demon-possessed, blind, and mute. The healing was spectacular. Christ healed him “so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw” (v. [22](#)).

Many of the onlookers drew a logical conclusion from this event. The religious significance of this miracle might be that Jesus was the “Son of David,” the promised Messiah!

But the Pharisees and other religious leaders responded by making this accusation: “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” ([Matt. 12:24](#)). We see the logic of the strategy when we remember our working definition of a miracle. A miracle is an extraordinary event caused by God with religious purpose or significance.

An extraordinary event. The healing of this demon-possessed man was certainly extraordinary. Not one witness, whether leader or commoner, could challenge the fact of the miracle. There were too many witnesses, undoubtedly including some leaders.

Caused by God. The people who witnessed this miracle naturally assumed that God was the source of Jesus' power. Who else but God could perform such miracles? Even the religious leaders had not challenged this assumption at first. When Nicodemus, a member of the ruling Jewish council, came to Jesus earlier, he confessed, “We know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” ([John 3:2](#)). The “we” undoubtedly included Nicodemus' fellow leaders.

With religious significance. Nicodemus had spoken of Jesus' miracles as “signs.” In the Old and New Testaments, this word indicates a miracle which authenticates the person who performed it as God's spokesman. The miracles were God's stamp of approval on Jesus and his message. God's people were bound by Scripture to listen and respond to such a person (compare [Deut. 18:19](#)).

From what Jesus taught and did, it was logical for the Jews to conclude that he was who he claimed to be—the promised Son of David, the Messiah, as well as the Son of God.

The leaders' problem and its solution. The leaders couldn't attack Jesus' miracles on the grounds that no miracles had taken place. Everyone agreed that Jesus performed miracles. The leaders could not attack the conviction that Jesus' miracles had religious significance. Such miracles required that the Jew who spoke in the name of the Lord must be heard ([Deut. 18:19](#)).

But the leaders could attack the assumption that the miracles of Jesus were caused by God! And this they did attack—both directly and through a campaign of rumors. They had to admit that Jesus performed miracles, but they charged the source of his miracles was Satan, not God!

If this notion were accepted, the religious implications were reversed. Rather than listen to Jesus, it would be the duty of the Jewish people to reject him and his teachings.

In the confrontation reported in [Matthew 12](#), Jesus refuted this accusation. If Satan were casting out Satan, Jesus reasoned, he was fighting himself. No kingdom wracked by civil war—war against itself—could possibly stand. And besides, if Jesus were casting out demons by Satan's power, was it possible that Jewish exorcists were drawing on the demonic when *they* cast out demons?

The fact that the demons were subject to Jesus showed that even Satan was powerless before him. In reality, the miracles of Jesus demonstrated that God's kingdom was once again breaking into the world, as God's power was exercised for all to see.

The leaders did not hesitate. They had not launched their attack on Jesus' miracles to convince others, but to raise doubts and to give themselves an excuse for their hatred of the Lord. If Jesus were God, they would have to bow to him and surrender their privileged position as interpreters of God's will. And this they would not do.

As for the people, they hesitated too long. They were ready to exalt Jesus as a prophet as great as any Old Testament figure other than Moses. But they would not acknowledge Jesus as the Savior sent from God or entertain the possibility that he might be who he claimed.

And so the miracles of Jesus led not to acclamation but to a cross and a barren tomb. But that tomb witnessed the greatest miracle of all: the resurrection. This event proved without a doubt that Jesus was the Son of God with power ([Rom. 1:4](#)).

And since that moment the world has never been the same.



THE SOURCES WHICH REPORT JESUS' MIRACLES

How the Gospels differ from one another. The miracles of Jesus are reported in the four Gospels. Each of the Gospels draws a word portrait of Jesus, designed to present him to a different audience. The Gospel of Matthew was written for the Jews. It sought to prove that Jesus was indeed the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. The Gospel of Mark was written for the Romans, portraying Jesus as God's agent who carried out the Father's will. The Gospel of Luke was written for the Hellenistic [Greek] mind. It portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of the Greek ideal of excellence—as the perfect man. The Gospel of John was written to demonstrate to all that Jesus undoubtedly was the living Son of God.

Implications of the Gospel differences. Each of these authors arranged his material to fit his audience and theme. Each selected from among Jesus' miracles those which best advanced his Gospel's argument. Each shaped the emphasis of the miracle story to contribute to reaching his goal. Thus the sequence in which various miracle stories were recounted, as well as details emphasized by the Gospel writers, are sometimes different. When details differ, it doesn't mean the accounts *conflict*, but that the authors emphasized elements of the events that best suited his purpose.

This means that we need to be aware of how the same miracle story may be used in different Gospels to make different points. A sequence of miraculous events may be ordered differently to emphasize a particular author's point.

The Gospel writers selected from a range of miracles that Jesus performed. Some miracles are reported in all the Gospels, while others occur in only one. Such a selection process was natural, considering the different emphasis of each Gospel writer. This means a miracle reported in a single Gospel is no less true or important than a miracle reported in all four.

The miracles of Jesus. It is somewhat deceptive to speak of the miracles of Jesus. The biblical text often refers to miracles which are not described in any Gospel. These references make it clear that Jesus performed many more miracles than the 35 which the Gospels treat in some detail. Healing miracles in particular were performed by Jesus throughout his ministry, even during his last week in Jerusalem.

GENERAL REFERENCES TO JESUS' MIRACLES IN THE GOSPELS

The following general references to miracles in Matthew alone make it clear that Christ performed many more miracles than are described in the Gospels.

Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Then his fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and he healed them ([Matt. 4:23, 24](#)).

When evening had come, they brought to him many who were demon-possessed, and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick ([Matt. 8:16](#)).

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages... healing every sickness and every disease among the people ([Matt. 9:35](#)).

Great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all ([Matt. 12:15](#)).

When Jesus went out he saw a great multitude; and he was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick ([Matt. 14:14](#)).

They sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to him all who were sick, and begged him that they might only touch the hem of his garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well ([Matt. 14:35](#)).

And great multitudes followed him, and he healed them there ([Matt. 19:2](#)).

Then the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them ([Matt. 21:14](#)).

Similar lists can be constructed from each of the other Gospels. In Mark: [Mark 1:32–34, 39; 3:10, 11; 6:2, 5; 6:55, 56](#). In Luke: [Luke 4:40, 41; 6:17–19; 7:21, 22; 8:2; 9:11](#). In John: [John 2:23; 6:2](#).





The 35 described miracles. The Gospels describe in detail only 35 of Jesus' many miracles. The Gospel writers wove these miracles into their accounts in the order and with the details that best contributed to the distinct theme and purpose of their respective books.

The chart on page 163 lists the 35 described miracles of Jesus as they appear, chapter by chapter, in each Gospel. We can see quickly these important facts:

- No Gospel writer included all 35.
- Some miracles are included in all four Gospels and some in only one.
- The miracle accounts may occur in different order in different Gospels.
- In the Synoptics [Matthew, Mark, Luke], the writers tended to cluster miracles to establish something important about Jesus.

The framework of Jesus' miracles. Before we go on to look in detail at the miracles of Jesus, it's important to note that the entire ministry of Jesus was encompassed within a miracle framework. Matthew and Luke began with accounts of Jesus' virgin birth, and John began with an affirmation of Jesus' pre-existence. The grand miracle of Incarnation [page 8–14] set the stage for the signs and wonders Jesus' performed. Looking ahead, the miracles of Jesus were to be expected, for Jesus was God come among us in human flesh.

As Jesus' miracle-working days drew to a close, the grand miracle of Resurrection [page 15–17] marked their end as a new beginning. Again, looking back, the miracles of Jesus were to be expected, for in the resurrection Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power ([Rom. 1:4](#)).

Viewed from either direction, looking ahead from the viewpoint of the Incarnation or looking back from the viewpoint of Resurrection, Jesus' miracles were in one sense not extraordinary at all, for the mighty works of Jesus were performed by history's most extraordinary personality.

THE MIRACLES OF JESUS CHRIST

We are now ready to look at the 35 recorded miracles of Jesus. The order we will follow is the actual historical order—as best we can tell—in which these miracles took place, although they may be sequenced differently in the different Gospels.

1. Jesus turns water to wine.—p. 165
2. Jesus heals a nobleman's son.—p. 169
3. Jesus provides a great catch of fish.—p. 176
4. Jesus heals a demoniac in a synagogue—p. 171
5. Jesus heals Peter's wife's mother.—p. 174
6. Jesus cleanses a leper.—p. 181
7. Jesus heals a paralytic.—p. 183
8. Jesus heals a cripple at Bethesda.—p. 186
9. Jesus heals a withered hand.—p. 190
10. Jesus heals a centurion's servant.—p. 191
11. Jesus raises a widow's son.—p. 194
12. Jesus stills a storm.—p. 196
13. Jesus delivers a demoniac in Gedara.—p. 198
14. Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman.—p. 201
15. Jesus raises Jairus's daughter.—p. 203
16. Jesus heals two blind men.—p. 205



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17. Jesus casts out a dumb spirit.—p. 206
18. Jesus feeds 5,000 people.—p. 208
19. Jesus walks on water.—p. 211
20. Jesus heals a Syro-phonician girl.—p. 214
21. Jesus heals a deaf and dumb man.—p. 216
22. Jesus feeds 4,000 people.—p. 217
23. Jesus heals a blind man.—p. 218
24. Jesus delivers a demonized boy.—p. 219
25. Jesus provides money in a fish's mouth—p. 221
26. Jesus heals a man born blind.—p. 222
27. Jesus heals a woman bound by Satan.—p. 225
28. Jesus heals a man with dropsy.—p. 227
29. Jesus raises Lazarus.—p. 228
30. Jesus cleanses ten lepers.—p. 232
31. Jesus heals Bartimaeus.—p. 233
32. Jesus curses a fig tree.—p. 235
33. Jesus replaces Malchus's ear.—p. 237
34. Wonders at Calvary.—p. 238
35. Jesus provides a catch of fish.—p. 243

JESUS TURNS WATER TO WINE [John 2:1-11](#)

Jesus went to a wedding in Cana. When the supply of wine ran out, he turned more than 100 gallons of water into wine.

Weddings in New Testament times ([John 2:1](#)). Jewish marriages were two-stage affairs. Betrothal involved the signing of a binding agreement between two families. A couple who had been betrothed to each other was considered husband and wife. The actual union took place a year later, when the groom went to the home of the bride with his friends and brought her to their new home. Festivities might continue for a week, with the bride and groom treated as queen and king.

Jesus attended one such wedding in Cana of Galilee, a small town about four miles from Nazareth. His mother Mary was there, and we can assume that friends and relatives from all around gathered to rejoice with the newlyweds. The wedding was the site of Jesus' first recorded miracle.

Jesus and his disciples ([John 2:2](#)). Just three days before this wedding event, Jesus had been baptized by John and identified by the Holy Spirit as the Son of God ([John 1:33-34](#)). Four of the men who later became his disciples stayed with Jesus—Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel. Quite possibly John was at the wedding too, although his name is not mentioned. Jesus and these disciples may have been passing through Cana on the way to Nazareth when all “were invited to the wedding.”

Most commentators tend to see the wedding as a significant setting for Jesus' first miracle ([John 2:11](#)). They also see Christ's presence as blessing and confirming the institution of marriage. But Christ's presence at this event may have been more prophetic.

Weddings were joyous occasions. For perhaps the only time in what was a difficult life, the bride and groom were treated as queen and king. Married life in first-century Palestine began with joy, but for most couples it was marked by toil as the couple struggled just to survive.



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What is fascinating is that Jesus' earthly ministry began with a wedding—and human history will end with a wedding. At history's end God's people will celebrate what [Revelation 19:9](#) calls the “marriage supper of the Lamb.” For Jesus, many trials lay between the beginning of his ministry at that wedding in Cana and the fulfillment of his ministry at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Trials are also a reality for us between our discovery of Christ and the fulfillment of faith's promise. But for Jesus and for us, the beginning and the end are set aside for joy!

The hosts ran out of wine ([John 2:3a](#)). Wedding feasts often lasted a week. The hospitality shown to Jesus and his friends helps explain a possible reason for the shortage of wine. More people than were expected joined the festivities.

The shortage happened in spite of the fact that wine was generally diluted with water. Most rabbinic prescriptions called for three parts of water to one part wine; others called for seven parts water to one part wine. Wine in the Old Testament was viewed somewhat ambivalently. In its undiluted form wine was a “strong drink,” and was condemned as a source of drunkenness ([Prov. 20](#); [21:17](#); [23:20](#)) and associated sins ([Amos 2:8, 12](#); [5:11](#); [6:6](#)). Yet wine was also a symbol of joy and feasting ([Amos 9:13–14](#)). Wine was given as gifts ([1 Sam. 25:18](#); [2 Sam. 16:1](#)), and was included among offerings made to the Lord ([Ex. 29:40](#); [Lev. 23:13](#); [Num. 15:7](#)).

To argue that Jesus would neither drink nor create a fermented beverage not only fails to fit the Scriptures; it is unnecessary to establish Scripture's position that drunkenness is a foolish sin.

The exhaustion of the supply of wine at the wedding in no way suggests the guests had drunk to excess.

Mary appealed to her son Jesus ([John 2:3b–5](#)). The exchange between Mary and her son Jesus is puzzling. Questions that have been raised include:

Why did Mary tell Jesus “they have no wine”? ([John 2:3b](#)). The implication is that Mary expected Jesus to do something about the shortage. But what did she expect? For some thirty years Jesus had lived a rather ordinary life in Nazareth. There was no reason for Mary to look to him for a miracle.

One possibility is that she hoped Jesus would contribute toward the purchase of additional wine. It was not unusual for guests to do so. Another possibility is suggested by the practice of mentioning a guest's name as a round of wine was poured. Mary may have been upset that the hosts ran out before Jesus could be honored.

Why did Jesus respond to Mary as he did? ([John 2:4](#)). Several things are puzzling about this verse. The NKJV reads, “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.’”

1. “Woman,” a polite form of address, was in no way harsh (compare [John 19:26](#)). Yet it was not the way grown sons generally addressed their mothers in the first century. It shows a distinct distancing of Jesus from his mother. Jesus was about to set out on the mission for which he came. One phase of his life on earth ended at his baptism—when the Spirit identified him as the Son of God—and another phase began. From now on his “family” would be composed of those who trust him as the Messiah (compare [Matt. 12:48](#)).
2. A literal translation of the Greek phrase is, “What to me and to you?” This was generally a harsh rather than polite phrase in the first century. It may have meant little more than “why involve Me?” Yet it further increases the distance between Mary and Jesus implied in his choice of the term *woman*.
3. The most difficult phrase is the last one Jesus uttered: “My hour has not yet come.” If Mary was upset over a possible slight to Jesus by not mentioning his name when a round of wine was mixed and poured, Christ's remark may mean little more than “it isn't my turn [to be so honored] anyway.”

However, most interpreters see far more implied. In the New Testament, Jesus' “hour” most often refers to his crucifixion ([Matt. 26:45](#); [John 7:30](#)). What Jesus may have been saying was, “Once I act and reveal who I am, my course is fixed, and I have set out for the cross.”

Jesus did act. A few minutes later he turned water into wine. This first miracle marked him: it revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him. With this miracle, performed to protect his hosts from the embarrassment of running out of wine, Jesus took the first step along a path which would bring healing to many, the agony of the cross for him, and salvation to us.

Why did Mary tell the servants to do whatever Jesus said? ([John 2:5](#)). Mary's words recall those of other saints who did not take “No” for an answer to their prayers (compare [Gen. 32:26–30](#); [1 Kings 18:36–37](#); [2 Kings 4:14–28](#)).



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Jewish readers would have taken her words as an expression of deep faith and confidence that Jesus would be able to do *something*.

Mary's confidence in Jesus was not misplaced. In spite of the fact that Jesus seemed to rebuke her, we must never lose sight of the fact that Mary was a woman of great faith.

BIBLE BACKGROUND:

SUPPOSED EARLY MIRACLES OF JESUS

After the church was established, a number of pseudo-Gospels were written. Several of these described miracles supposedly performed by Jesus as a boy. Lockyer recounted a few. "When the holy family was threatened by a number of dragons emerging from a cave, Jesus leapt from his mother's lap and dispersed the dragons, saying, 'Fear not, for although I am only an infant, it must needs be that all the wild beasts should grow tame in My presence.' Another miracle was that of the Child Jesus shortening a thirty-day journey into one day, and as the family entered Egypt 355 idols in a heathen temple there fell prostrate on the ground. Then there is the weird story about Jesus making twelve sparrows out of mud, clapping his hands and commanding them to fly."

These fables bear no resemblance to the miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. And all are ruled out by the affirmation of [John 2:11](#) that the changing of water into wine was the "beginning of" the miraculous signs which Jesus performed.

Water changed into wine ([John 2:6–11](#)). The large stone jars contained water to be used for ceremonial washing of the hands, and perhaps to fill the ritual bath, the *mikva*. Rabbinic law specified the water for this bath had to be "living water"—i.e., running water. However, collected rain water would do in Galilee, which was far less rigid about such matters than Judea. Jesus' choice of these jars was an early indication of Christ's hostility to the constant addition to God's written law made by the rabbis in New Testament times (see [Matt. 15:9](#)).

What occurred next was an unmistakable miracle. There was no way that the miracle Jesus performed could involve trickery. It was servants who followed Jesus' instructions and filled water pots from the larger jars. Servants followed Jesus' instructions and carried the filled pots to the master of the feast, who was responsible for mixing and distributing the wine. Jesus' future disciples stood by and observed all that happened. When the master of the feast pronounced the drink a far better wine than had been served earlier in the week, the servants knew. And the disciples knew. Jesus had turned the water into wine.

There are several things to note about this miracle.

The miracle was of the "old creation." There is a harmony between Jesus' miracle and what happens in nature. It is natural for water to fall from the heavens, to be absorbed by the roots of a grape vine, to be drawn up into the grapes, and then to be pressed out of the ripe grapes as "new wine." What Jesus did was not contrary to this natural process but in harmony with it.

The difference is that Jesus changed the water into wine without the agency of the vine—and that he did so immediately without the time required by the normal transformation.

We so easily take for granted the "natural processes" of this world that we fail to see the hand of God in what are actually wonders. Surely the God who designed nature to produce wine from water by such a complex process as we observe in the grape vine was not tested by producing wine that day in Cana.

The miracle was a sign ([2:11](#)). The Greek word used here for "sign" is *semeion*, which occurs 77 times in the New Testament. It is used to identify an act which calls for the exercise of supernatural power. Biblical signs are recognized as supernatural by observers. They authenticate the person who performs the sign as someone sent by God.

The miracle was performed without incantations or spells. The people of the biblical world turned to magic to exercise some control over their environment. A "magician" would have made a great show of his attempt to turn water into wine. He would have uttered the names of angels and demons, and called them to do his will. In contrast, Jesus stood by quietly as the servants carried out his instructions, and then simply waited as the master of the feast took a first taste. Jesus' power to perform miracles did not lie in his mastery of magic but within his own person.

The miracle manifested Jesus' glory ([2:11](#)). In Scripture, God's "glory" is associated with his self-revelation. And the display of God's glory throughout Scripture is linked closely to God's acts in our universe.



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John, in the introduction to his Gospel, wrote that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” ([John 1:14](#)). The miracles of Jesus made it clear that God was again acting in this world. The reality of who Jesus was began to shine through in this very first miracle. With each succeeding wonder, Christ’s deity beamed brighter and brighter, until the resurrection set to rest any shadow of doubt. Jesus is God incarnate as a human being.

The miracle developed the disciples’ trust in Jesus (2:11). Two disciples had heard John identify Jesus as the Son of God ([John 1:34](#)). They found the others and excitedly reported, “We have found the Messiah [the Christ]!” ([John 1:41](#)). Another, Nathaniel, had been convinced by speaking to Jesus himself ([John 1:47](#)–). These men *already* believed in Jesus, at least to the extent to which they knew him. What the miracle at Cana did for them was to deepen their existing faith rather than create a non-existent faith.

Personal applications of the miracle at Cana. Mary, Jesus’ mother, seemed certain that Jesus could do something about the failure of the wine supply. She didn’t know what he might do, but she appealed to him anyway. Even his strange response did not quench her confidence. Mary surely did not expect the solution that Jesus provided. Christ solved the problem in his own way, by performing the first of a number of miracles recorded in the Gospels.

It’s important for us, when we’re faced with a situation that seems hopeless, to follow Mary’s lead and turn to Jesus. We may not receive an immediate reply; we may even feel put off. But like Mary, we need to have confidence in his ability to come to our aid.

We can never predict what Jesus will do to help us. But we can know that our God is a miracle-working God and that his solution to our problem will be far better than our own. As Christ answers our prayers, he continues to display his glory. And our faith in him continues to grow.

JESUS HEALS A NOBLEMAN’S SON [John 4:46–54](#)

An anxious father traveled twenty miles to beg Jesus to heal his dying son.

The background of the miracle. This miracle, like Jesus’ first, also occurred at Cana of Galilee. But time has passed. In the interim, Jesus had performed miracles in Jerusalem during Passover week ([John 2:23](#)) which impressed the religious leaders so much that they concluded at first that God must be with him ([John 3:2](#)). When Jesus returned home, he was welcomed by his fellow citizens of Galilee. Many had witnessed the miracles He had performed in Jerusalem.

Stories about Jesus had spread rapidly. When “a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum” heard that Jesus was in Galilee, he immediately went to him ([John 4:46, 47](#)).

The parties to the miracle. More people were involved in this miracle than is generally true of Jesus’ miracles. The participants or parties to the miracle were Jesus, the anxious father, the dying son, bystanders, and the nobleman’s household. Significantly, Jesus’ disciples are not mentioned by John. The text says “Jesus came again to... Galilee,” not when *they* came. Jesus was apparently traveling alone.

Jesus. Jesus had now performed miracles which had set him apart. Tales of his wonders spread rapidly. The Passover was a religious festival which every Jewish man in Judah and Galilee was supposed to attend. Many other Jews came from across Eastern and Western worlds. But at this point in his ministry, the people were unclear just who Jesus was. They knew only that God had worked wonders through him, indicating that he must at least be a prophet.

The nobleman. The word translated “nobleman” means “royal official.” The fact that he lived in Capernaum indicates he was an officer in the service of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Herod was addressed by the courtesy title of “king.”

When we meet the royal official, however, we don’t see an important man; we see an anxious father. All the externals such as social position meant nothing; all he could think of was the son who appeared to be dying. When he heard that Jesus was in Cana, he didn’t hesitate. He set out immediately and in person to beg Christ to heal his son.

The dying son. Twice the text emphasizes the fact that the son was “at the point of death” and dying ([John 4:47, 49](#)). A true emergency existed. The fear that drove the father was well-founded.

The bystanders. The reference to bystanders is almost an aside in the text, but it is clear that many people witnessed the exchange between Jesus and the anxious father. We see this in [John 4:48](#). Jesus addressed the crowd and said,



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“Unless you *people* see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.” The word *people* was supplied by the translators of this text, because the “you” is plural. Jesus was not rebuking the father. He was commenting on the attitude of the crowd. They trailed after Jesus not because they were eager to hear and believe what he might say, but because they wanted to see a miracle!

The nobleman’s “whole household.” In biblical times, the household of an important man included not only his wife and children and other relatives but also his servants and, in many cases, others who depended on his generosity (known in Rome as “clients”).

The servants clearly shared the official’s concern for his son. When the child suddenly recovered, several set out from Capernaum to report the wonderful news.

It is significant that as a result of the miracle, “he himself believed, and his whole household ([John 4:53](#)). Each person made his or her own choice of faith. Yet they had seen proof of Jesus’ power and his compassion. It was natural for them to join their master, placing their trust in Jesus Christ as well.

How the story unfolds. The official heard that Jesus was in Cana and immediately set out to reach him. When he found Jesus, he implored Christ to “come down and heal his son” ([John 4:47](#)).

We can imagine the onlookers drawing closer, waiting to see what Jesus would do. Will they get to see another miracle? This was when Jesus looked at them and rebuked them. All they were concerned about was seeing “signs and wonders.”

At this, the father burst out, “Sir, come down before my child dies” ([John 4:49](#)). The royal official could care less about witnessing a miracle. It was his desperate need, not curiosity, that drove him to Jesus.

How important to distinguish the curious from the needy today. God has not called us to debate theology or pander to the interests of those who love to speculate about religion. There are men and women all around us who hurt and for whom only a relationship with Jesus can heal. These are the people to whom we are to give our time and show Christ’s compassion. These are the people whose hearts God is preparing to open.

Jesus then spoke to the father who had begged him to go to Capernaum. “Go your way; your son lives” ([John 4:50](#)). We might paraphrase this, “Go on home. Your son is all right.” This comment from anyone else might have been considered a cold, heartless remark. But the official did not see it as such. He took it as a binding promise. Believing, he started back to Capernaum.

On the way “down”—Cana lies in the highlands well above Capernaum—servants met him and told him the boy was all right. Apparently the father had expected a gradual recovery, for the Greek wording is better translated, “He asked them the hour when he *began to get better*” ([John 4:51](#)). The servants’ answer revealed that at the very moment Jesus had said “Your son lives,” the boy had recovered completely and instantly!

The text indicates that the father and his whole household—including no doubt the son—put their trust in Jesus.

And so John concluded, “This again is the second sign Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee” (v. [54](#)). This was Jesus’ second sign in Galilee.

Jesus’ unbounded power. This miracle of Jesus did more than authenticate him as God’s spokesman. It demonstrated that Jesus’ power is unbounded. The space of twenty miles between Jesus and the dying boy was no barrier to our Lord. He spoke, “He lives,” and the son’s recovery was instantaneous and complete.

In the same way, no boundaries exist for Jesus today. Christ is in heaven, but he is also here with us. Any word he speaks will be obeyed, to the outer limits of the universe. No matter what our emergency, we can reach him instantly as well. He hears our prayers today, just as he heard the pleadings of the anxious father so long ago. As Christ in compassion reached across the miles to meet that father’s need, so he will reach out today to meet ours.

Faith that grows. It is always important in looking at a miracle story to be alert for repeated words and themes. In this story “faith” is a repeated theme. The word *believe* occurs in [John 4:48](#), [50](#), [53](#). Faith is also implicit in the anxious father’s efforts to reach Jesus. He would not have set out unless he had some hope, some budding belief that Jesus could help.

In the account, faith was contrasted with curiosity. The crowds that observed the miracles were there because they wanted to see a miracle. There is no indication in the text that the miracle, to which only the father and his



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household were actually witnesses, had any impact on the curious. The cry, “Show us a miracle,” was not an indication of faith, but unbelief.

In the account, faith was interpreted as growing. The theme of faith is clearly developed in the miracle account.

1. The father had some faith initially, as demonstrated by the fact that he set out to find Jesus. It may have been little faith, fanned by desperation. But faith it was.
2. His faith was then tested by Jesus’ command and promise. It is significant that the command, “Go your way,” was uttered first. But the promise *accompanied* the command: “Your child lives.”

How often we delay obeying God, hoping that he will act or that he will at least give us more faith. But the only way our faith can grow is by exercising it. To exercise our faith, we must obey the commands of God, however strange they may seem.

This miracle reminds us that with every command there is a promise. With every step of obedience, we move further into the circle of God’s richest blessings.

3. Faith that is exercised grows and spreads. The official’s faith not only matured; it was reflected in his “whole household” ([John 4:53](#)). It is not that the household believed *because of* the father’s faith. The father’s faith—focused as it was on Jesus and his word—*directed the attention* of the members of his household to the Lord.

They believed because they saw Jesus for themselves. But they looked to Jesus in the first place because the official directed their gaze toward him.

Faith in John’s Gospel. One of the main themes of John’s Gospel is trust, or faith. Near the end of his Gospel, John wrote, “Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” ([John 20:30, 31](#)). How clearly the healing of the nobleman’s son illustrated John’s theme.

In the face of death, a hopeful faith drove the anxious father to Jesus. Christ gave him a command and a promise. In faith the father obeyed and claimed the promise. And the result was life. The son recovered, and new faith was born in the hearts of all in that household who witnessed the healing.

Today, looking into the Scriptures, we also place our trust and faith in Jesus. As we do, we are given eternal life in his name.

JESUS HEALS A DEMONIAK IN A SYNAGOGUE [Mark 1:21–28](#); [Luke 4:31–37](#)

When a demon-possessed man interrupted a synagogue service where Jesus was teaching, Christ commanded the demon to leave.

Background of the miracle. Jesus was already established as a wonder-worker when he went to the synagogue outside Capernaum one Sabbath. After performing notable signs in Jerusalem during Passover, Jesus had moved his primary residence from Nazareth to Capernaum ([Matt. 17:24](#)), where he stayed with a successful fisherman named Peter ([Mark 1:2–31](#)).

That morning in the synagogue, Jesus was teaching the Scriptures. His exposition of the Old Testament was different from what the worshipers expected. The text indicates they were astonished “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” ([Mark 1:22](#)).

By Jesus’ time, what is known as rabbinic Judaism was already well established. A long oral tradition regarding their faith and beliefs had been built up, consisting of the rulings of earlier rabbis. This body of interpretations would continue to build during the first century. Thus, those who taught in the synagogues usually cited the words and sayings of earlier sages or contemporaries like Hillel or Shammai. But when Jesus spoke, he did not cite the rabbis. He taught as if he himself was Scripture’s interpreter—as “one having authority.”

It was in the context of Jesus’ authoritative exposition of the Word of God that a striking miracle took place.

Parties to the miracle. The parties to this miracle were Jesus, the demonized man, the demon, and the assembled congregation.

Jesus. This miracle was placed early in Jesus’ ministry by both Mark and Luke. It is interesting that immediately before relating this story, Luke described in some detail what Jesus taught in his home synagogue in Nazareth.



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It was traditional during synagogue services to honor an important visitor by inviting him to read and comment on the Scriptures. In Nazareth, Jesus was handed the scroll containing the prophecies of Isaiah. He turned to a messianic passage, [Isaiah 61:1, 2](#), read it, and then announced, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” ([Luke 4:21](#)).

The demon-possessed man. The text describes this man as one “who had a spirit of an unclean demon” ([Luke 4:33](#)). Demons are just as real as angels. Like angels, they are personal beings created holy by God, who chose to follow Satan in a great rebellion which occurred before the creation of Adam and Eve. (See the companion volume, *Every Good and Evil Angel in the Bible*.)

Typically, the people who are described as demon-possessed in the Gospels display various symptoms, ranging from apparent madness and unusual strength to a variety of physical infirmities. But this man appeared normal. He attended synagogue with his neighbors, acting no differently than they. He apparently lived according to Moses’ laws and was outwardly “clean,” while within he was in the grip of corruption.

This demon-possessed man is a healthy reminder to us. We judge by appearances. The well-dressed man or woman sitting beside us in the pew may seem completely respectable. But it is not appearance that counts with God. God considers what is in the heart.

The demon. What a commentary on the spiritual state of Israel—the demon felt comfortable in the synagogue! The people had gathered to worship God. Yet there was no sense of the reality of God to make the demon uncomfortable—until Jesus joined that company.

There are spiritually powerless churches today. And there are spiritually powerful churches. The difference is Jesus. Where Christ is loved and honored—where hearts are lifted in praise and his Word is lived—no unclean person or demon can be comfortable.

The congregation. The congregation gathered that Sabbath heard Jesus teach. They witnessed the deliverance of the demonized man. They were not passive witnesses. But neither were they convinced, for they did not understand what they saw that day.

How the story unfolds. The accounts in Mark and Luke agree in every detail about this miracle. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. The congregation was amazed because he taught as a person having authority, not as a person relying on established rabbinic authorities.

As Jesus was teaching, one man in the congregation interrupted with an anguished shout. It was a man with an unclean spirit, a demon. It was the demon and not the man who shouted, “Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” ([Luke 4:34](#)).

Jesus immediately rebuked the evil spirit, commanding it to be quiet and to come out of the man.

At Jesus’ command, the demon uttered a shriek, convulsed the man he possessed, and left. The congregation witnessed the whole thing in amazement. They couldn’t grasp what was happening. They knew that Jesus commanded the unclean spirit and that it obeyed him. But what did it all mean?

The story was told “throughout all the region around Galilee,” and Jesus’ fame spread ([Mark 1:28](#)).

In the story, the event unfolded rapidly—the confrontation with the demon took place in moments. Yet so much of what happened in those moments is significant.

The demon’s reaction to Jesus ([Mark 1:24](#)). The Greek verb used to describe Jesus’ teaching suggests that he expounded the Scriptures for some time. The congregation quickly realized that Jesus’ teaching was different.

But while the congregation wondered, one man in the synagogue had been growing more and more agitated. He was responding to the emotions that surged in an evil being who had taken up residence in his life—a demon.

The demon was not concerned with Jesus’ teaching but was reacting to Christ himself. Finally the demon could stand it no longer. Gripped by terror and revulsion, the demon forced his host to stand and shouted at Jesus.

Let us alone! This first cry shows how painful it was for the demon to be in Jesus’ presence. To demons, who conceal themselves in darkness, it is agonizing to be in the presence of light. And Jesus was and is the Light of the World ([John 8:12](#)).



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What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? The phrase means “What have we in common?” In the first century it was typically spoken by an inferior to a superior. The demon recognized the authority of Jesus and that Christ would be responsible for whatever would follow.

There is perhaps more here for us. The cry reminds us that demons have nothing in common with Christ. When Satan rebelled, he and his followers turned their back on God. They became the enemies of their Creator, hostile to all whom he loves. Whatever means the demon used to gain access to the man he possessed, his intent was to do harm—while Jesus came to help and to redeem.

Did You come to destroy us? The demon was aware that God had decreed punishment for the devil and his angels ([Matt. 25:41](#)). What troubled the demon was “when?” The query torn from the demon was, “Are you here to judge us *now*?”

Likewise, there is no uncertainty about the fate of human beings. The only question is, “How soon will the day of judgment dawn?” How important it is to respond to the gospel today, while the door of salvation remains open.

I know who You are—the Holy One of God! While Jesus’ humanity concealed his essential deity from human beings, his identity was known to demons. His shining essence was evident to the demon, who was not limited to physical sight. Mark frequently described encounters with demons who identified Jesus as the Son of God (see [Mark 3:11](#); [5:7](#)).

The demon’s reaction to Jesus displayed both terror and doubt. The demon was afraid of what Jesus might do to him, but at the same time he was forced to acknowledge Jesus’ authority over him.

Jesus’ response to the demon ([Mark 1:25](#)). The Greek word translated “rebuked” has a technical meaning. It refers to a commanding word spoken by God or his spokesman. By this word, evil powers are forced to submit.

Jesus’ first command: “Be quiet.” The literal meaning of the word is “be muzzled.” While the demon was able to shriek, he did not utter another word.

Why was Jesus unwilling to receive the testimony of this and other demons (see [Mark 1:34](#))? Some suggest Jesus had not yet laid a foundation in teaching and wonder-working to be ready to state his claim. Others wonder if Jesus was guarding himself against the charge made later by the Pharisees that he derived his power from Satan (see [Matt. 12:24](#)). A better explanation may be the general conviction in first-century Judaism that any testimony from certain sources was suspect.

For instance, in Jesus’ time a shepherd was not allowed to give testimony in court. The reputation of first-century shepherds as vagabonds and thieves made whatever they might say suspect in the eyes of the rabbis! If the testimony of a shepherd was automatically discounted, how much more the testimony of a demon?

Jesus needed no such testimony to establish his deity. His words and his miracles spoke for themselves.

Jesus’ next command: “Come out of him.” The demon had no choice but to obey. He uttered a shriek, threw his host into a convulsion, and left the man.

The reaction of the congregation ([Mark 1:22](#), [27](#)). This story appears to focus on the confrontation between Jesus and the demon. Certainly this is its most dramatic element. Yet the greater significance of the miracle is seen in two words which bracket the miracle—words which describe the reaction of the congregation to Jesus.

“They were astonished at his teaching” ([Mark 1:22](#)). The Greek word used here is *ekplesso*. It is usually used to describe the reaction of uncommitted listeners to Jesus’ teaching. It suggests an amazement which so stunned the listener that he was unable to grasp the meaning of what has happened. Jesus taught as a person having authority, but the congregation could not imagine what this implied about him.

“Then they were all amazed” ([Mark 1:27](#)). This describes the congregations’ reaction to the miracle. The word used is *thambeo*, which emphasizes the fright caused by an amazing event.

The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* notes, “This family of words helps to remind us that Jesus’ acts and words were ‘amazing’ primarily to those who did not believe in him” (p. 38). The phrase, “So that they questioned among themselves” further describes the congregation’s reaction. It implies their intense argument and dispute. Jesus was clearly special. His teaching was unique. But what did it mean? Even demons obeyed him. But who was he?



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Today, looking back from the perspective of the Cross and the Resurrection, we have no doubts about Jesus' identity or his authority. Yet even in his own day this miracle, and others recorded in the Gospels, began to forge a chain of evidence that left those who ultimately rejected him without excuse.

JESUS HEALS PETER'S WIFE'S MOTHER [Luke 4:38, 39](#); [Matthew 8:14-15](#); [Mark 1:29-31](#)

Jesus returned to Peter's house from the synagogue and healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever.

Background of the miracle. Jesus had just cast out a demon from a man in the synagogue at Capernaum (p. 171). He and four fishermen friends went to Peter's house, where Jesus probably stayed while in Capernaum. There Jesus was told that Peter's mother-in-law was suffering from a severe fever. What follows is recounted in each of the synoptic Gospels, but it is the briefest account of any miracle recorded there.

Parties to the miracle. The central figures were Jesus and Peter's mother-in-law. Mark made an oblique reference to members of the household, simply saying that "they" told Jesus about the sick woman, while Luke indicated "they" made request of him concerning her.

Jesus. The picture of Jesus in this miracle contrasts with that in the miracle account which immediately preceded it. There, Jesus was described as a figure with immense authority, displayed both in his teaching and in his casting out of a demon. In this miracle, Jesus seems more of an ordinary man. He walked home from the synagogue with his friends. He went into the house where he was staying, ready to eat a meal. When Jesus learned that Peter's mother-in-law was sick, he went in to see her.

These are all ordinary acts—the acts of a common man. And they remind us that while Jesus was truly God, he was also fully human.

The mother-in-law. None of the evangelists do more than identify the sick woman by her relationship to Peter. She lived in Peter's house ([Luke 4:38](#)), which suggests she was a widow. She was sick with what Luke—a physician interested in medical details—described as a "high" fever.

The household. No one in the household was named. The ruins of a larger home in Capernaum have been excavated and tentatively identified as Peter's residence. The "they" in this text probably included Peter's wife, any children, and perhaps servants.

How the story unfolds. Returning from the synagogue, Jesus found Peter's mother-in-law was sick. He went into the sick room. Each Gospel writer adds a detail to what happened in that room. Jesus rebuked the fever, and it left immediately. Jesus also touched the woman, then took her hand to help her up from the bed. Completely restored, Peter's mother-in-law then served the men the meal which she had prepared the previous day, before the Sabbath.

Jesus "rebuked" the fever ([Luke 4:39](#)). The Greek word for "rebuked"—*epetimesen*—is the same word Jesus used when he cast out the demon in the synagogue ([Luke 4:35](#)). This word had a technical meaning. It indicated a commanding word spoken by God or his spokesman, by which evil powers were forced to submit.

Just as the demon was an evil power bent on harming humankind, so sickness was an evil power. Christ came to break the grip of every evil that holds down humanity. This mission will ultimately be fulfilled at our resurrection. In the meantime, Jesus' ability to heal was clearly demonstrated in this and many other miracles described in the Gospels.

The outcome of the miracle ([Luke 4:39](#)). Each Gospel's account of this miracle relates that "she arose and served them."

How neatly we could apply this miracle if only the text read, "She arose and served *him*." Then we could point out the symmetry of salvation. Jesus served us by making us spiritually whole, and in response we commit our lives to serving him. But each of the three accounts agrees—that she got up and served *them*. It was as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The men returned home. The mother-in-law, who had laid out the table and the food the previous afternoon, had them sit down and then she served them—just like any other Sabbath.

It is almost as if the miracle were too small a thing to interrupt the pattern of the family's life. We can almost imagine a later conversation:

"Anything special happen after synagogue?"

"No, nothing much. Oh, wait. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law."



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“That was nice. What did she serve for Sabbath dinner?”

What a difference there had been in the synagogue after Jesus expelled a demon. In the synagogue there had been anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion as the congregation pondered the meaning of what it had heard and seen. But in Peter’s house, everything continued on in its ordinary way.

In a sense, this “unexceptional” miracle of Jesus at Peter’s house reflects something of our own experience with the Lord. His miracles for us are often quiet and ordinary. Yet it is his presence in our home that averts so many tragedies, maintaining the peace that we enjoy. Perhaps the little miracles of Jesus, performed behind closed doors so that ordinary people can continue on in their ordinary ways, are the most significant miracles of all.

JESUS PROVIDES A GREAT CATCH OF FISH [Luke 5:1-11](#)

Jesus’ miracle at the Sea of Galilee illustrated the mission to which he called his disciples.

Background of the miracle. Each of the synoptic Gospels gives an account of Jesus’ call of a closely knit group of fishermen to become his disciples. Each writer portrayed a few fisherman on the shore of the Sea of Galilee [called Lake Gennesaret by Luke]. Some were mending drag nets, while others listlessly threw cast nets ([Matt. 5:18-21](#)). Only Luke’s Gospel went into detail about what happened there that day, and only Luke described the miracle of the great catch of fish.

According to Luke and Mark, the call of the disciples followed miracles Jesus performed in the synagogue at Capernaum in the home of Peter. It’s important to remember this. Otherwise, we might get the impression that Jesus just happened to be at the seaside, where he invited four strangers to become his disciples. It wasn’t like that at all.

Jesus’ relationship with the fishermen. The four fishermen were Peter, Andrew, James, and John; and Jesus knew each of them well. Peter and Andrew had met Jesus the day he was baptized by John the Baptist several weeks or months before ([John 1:35-42](#)). James and John were partners with Peter in a successful fishing business. Several of these fishermen, perhaps all four, had been with Jesus in Cana of Galilee, where they witnessed his first miracle ([John 2:2](#)).

The four had undoubtedly been witnesses to miracles Jesus performed in Jerusalem before returning to Galilee. They had been together in the Capernaum synagogue when Jesus cast a demon out of a man in the congregation. It is clear that the four were already very close to Jesus. After this miracle, they went with Jesus to eat together at Peter’s house ([Mark 1:29](#)).

So Jesus’ call to discipleship was no spontaneous invitation issued to strangers. Jesus had invested significant time in their relationship before calling these four to become his disciples.

It’s good to remember this. At times we try to rush others into a decision about Jesus. We need to invest time as Jesus did, building a relationship in which others can come to know and trust us. Then through us, they can come to know and trust Christ.

The call to become disciples. Sometimes the word *disciple* is used in the Gospels to describe the curious who became loose adherents of his movement. But when *disciple* is applied to the Twelve, it has a different, more technical meaning.

In the first century, those intent on becoming religious leaders attached themselves to a man who was already recognized as a rabbi, an expert in written and oral Law. They became “disciples” and lived with their teacher for a period of years, intent on mastering all that the teacher knew and becoming as much like him as possible (see [Luke 6:40](#)). This training, a rigorous spiritual apprenticeship, was the only way a person could gain a position of religious authority in Judaism.

It was to this rigorous spiritual apprenticeship that Jesus called the four fishermen that day. They would have to leave their business behind, abandoning all to be with Jesus night and day. In coming years, Jesus’ disciples would gradually learn from his example and from his public and private teaching, until they were fully equipped to become leaders in the movement Jesus founded. It was no light thing to be a teacher’s disciple in New Testament times. Discipleship called for informed commitment.

This is why Jesus spent so much time with these men who formed the core group of the Twelve, whom he ultimately assembled. They had to know and trust him, so that when he called them to discipleship, they would make the choice with eyes wide open.



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The parties to the miracle. [Luke 5](#) provides the sharpest and most detailed description of the setting of the miracle. The central parties to the miracle were Jesus and Peter, a great crowd, and Peter's fishing partners.

Jesus. Jesus was teaching crowds that had gathered in response to his spreading fame. Yet he paid primary attention not to the multitudes but to individuals—and particularly Simon Peter.

Peter. In spite of his closeness to Jesus, Peter was still busy working as a fisherman. Every hint in Scripture indicates that he was a very successful fisherman. Although originally from the small town of Bethsaida ([John 1:44](#)), Peter had purchased a large home in Capernaum, the political center of the district, and he and his partners fished and marketed their catch from there. He was clearly the most influential in the partnership, as he continued to be after becoming a disciple of Jesus.

In almost every dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, Peter's is the first voice we hear, opinionated but not always right (see [Matt. 16:22–23](#); [26:33–34](#)). In this account, Peter expressed not only his own feelings, but the unspoken feelings of his partners.

The multitudes. Aside from providing the occasion for the miracle and the call of Jesus' first disciples, the crowds that had come to Capernaum to see Jesus had no role in the miracle report.

Andrew, James, and John. These three of the four who were called by Jesus to be his disciples that day are almost ignored. We are told of their reaction to the miracle (they were astonished), and of their response to Jesus (they "forsook all and followed him"; [Luke 5:11](#)). But otherwise, they stood outside the spotlight, letting Peter speak what they may have been feeling as well.

How the story unfolds ([Luke 5:1–11](#)). The crowds that had gathered to hear Jesus pressed so close that Christ, standing on the shore of Galilee, was almost pushed into the water. So Jesus got into Peter's boat and asked his friend to push him out from the shore. There, isolated from the crowd, Jesus taught from the boat.

When he finished teaching, Jesus told Peter to row out to deeper water and let down his nets. Peter, an experienced fisherman, knew there were no fish. Most fishing on Galilee was done at night, and the schools of fish the fisherman pursued were never found where Jesus told Peter to let down his nets.

Peter, complaining a bit ("We have toiled all night and caught nothing"), did as Jesus said. But Peter let down only one net rather than the "nets" Jesus had called for (compare [Luke 5:4](#) and [5:5](#)). Even this partial obedience was rewarded overwhelmingly. So many fish were caught in the net that it began to break!

It took all the partners working in two boats to bring in the catch. The two boats were so full of fish that they began to take on water.

The miracle had a peculiar effect on Peter. He fell on his knees and begged Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" ([Luke 5:8](#)). Instead of leaving, Jesus reassured Peter. He was not to fear, for God had something more important for Peter to do than catch fish: "From now on you will catch men."

The story ended with the partners pulling their boats on the shore, leaving everything behind—boats and fish as well—to set out after Jesus.

Reluctant obedience ([Luke 5:5](#)). Peter was clearly reluctant to launch out into deeper water and let down a net. After all, Peter was an experienced fisherman. He knew the ways of fish, and where they could be found. Peter knew there was no way any fish would be in the spot where Jesus told him to let down the net. In spite of all this, Peter respected Jesus. He obeyed not because he expected a miracle, but out of respect.

But respect only carried Peter so far. Peter couldn't see the sense in letting down "nets." Reluctantly, Peter did push out and let down one net.

Jesus had told Peter to let down his nets "for a catch" ([Luke 5:4](#)). But Peter was unprepared when suddenly the net bulged with fish. When Jesus tells us to obey and get ready for results, it's best that we be prepared!

Peter's use of "master" and "Lord" ([Luke 5:5](#); [5:8](#)). At the beginning of the story, the reluctant Peter addressed Jesus as *epistata*. The word is typically translated "master," even though "boss" perhaps better captures its flavor. Although it was a blue-collar word, no disrespect was implied. The use of *epistata* still implied recognition of Jesus' authority.

Even so, *epistata* was not as significant a word as the one Peter chose after the great catch of fish. Stunned as only an experienced fisherman would be, Peter fell on his knees before Jesus and cried out, *Kurie*, which has the



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force of “supreme Lord” ([Luke 5:8](#)). Peter was overwhelmed with the realization that God was present in this Jesus, whom he had been treating only as a respected friend!

It is good for us to be on familiar terms with Jesus. We can go to him as *epistata*, or even as a brother and friend. But we can never forget that Jesus is at the same time the supreme Lord of the universe, whom we are to view with respect and awe.

Peter’s request ([Luke 5:8](#)). At first, Peter’s response to the miracle amazes us. Why did Peter ask Jesus to go away, using the excuse that he was a sinful human being? Why wasn’t Peter excited about the miraculous catch? Why wasn’t he thankful?

Not the miracle, but the miracle worker. Peter’s reaction is rooted in the fact that he was no longer concerned with the miracle. The miracle had forced Peter to look at Jesus in a new way. It was one thing to see Jesus perform miracles for others. But it was another thing entirely for Peter to experience the miracle *personally*. This time he felt the net’s ropes ripped out of his hand. He struggled to lift the surging net. He hurriedly transferred fish from the net to the boats. He saw the loaded boats sink deeper into the water until the waves began to sweep over their sides. Peter had felt and smelled and tasted this miracle for himself. And suddenly he was forced to look at Jesus with fresh eyes and to see him for the awesome person he was.

In that moment of personal discovery, Peter fell to his knees and cried out, *Kurie*, “O Supreme Lord.”

Not the fisherman, but the sinner ([Luke 5:8](#)). Just as the miracle forced Peter to look at Jesus with fresh eyes, the sudden realization of who Jesus was triggered self-discovery. Peter had thought of himself primarily as a master of his trade. Now he was overwhelmed by the realization that “I am a sinful man.”

We cannot stand in the presence of Jesus and see him clearly as the Holy One of God without becoming sensitive to the fact that we are sinners. A person who compares himself to other people can take some comfort in the fact that many are worse than he. But if we compare ourselves to Jesus Christ, we take no comfort at all. We know how far short we fall.

When this happens, our first reaction may be that of Peter, who felt both guilt and shame. Peter’s impulsive solution was to beg Jesus to withdraw. But if Jesus were to withdraw from us, we would be left with our problem of guilt and shame unresolved.

“He and all who were with him were astonished” ([Luke 5:9](#)). The word translated “astonished” is *thambeo*, which is also used in [Luke 4:36](#). In each case, it depicted fright caused by an amazing event. Peter and the others were uncertain of the meaning of the great catch of fish. They knew it was a miracle. They felt a sudden awe of Jesus. But what did this demonstration of Jesus’ power *mean*?

Their initial reaction of fear was only natural. Like Peter, the others had experienced Jesus in a new way. Their recognition of his deity and their own sinfulness made them anxious. This holds a lesson for us. God may seem a frightening specter as long as his intentions remain a mystery. But when Jesus speaks, he makes his intentions clear.

“Do not be afraid” ([Luke 5:9](#)). Jesus’ first words reassured the fishermen. In making himself known to Peter and his friends, Jesus intended no harm. There is no need to be afraid of Jesus Christ.

“From now on you will catch men” ([Luke 5:10](#)). Jesus knew that Peter and his partners were sinners. But Jesus wanted them as his own nonetheless. By choosing to follow Jesus, their lives would be reoriented. The partners who had once invested their lives in catching fish would soon invest their lives in a far more significant task. They would share in Jesus’ ministry, investing their lives in capturing human hearts and turning them to the Lord.

“They forsook all and followed him” ([Luke 5:11](#)). The miracle had its desired effect. Peter and his partners looked not at what Jesus had done, but at Jesus himself. They bowed to the ground, confessing Jesus as supreme Lord.

Now when their supreme Lord commanded them to follow him, they were ready. What a stunning discovery. In coming to earth, the Son of God had not come to punish or to condemn, but to recruit followers who would make his mission their own. Captured by this vision, the four fishermen left everything behind and with joy and wonder set out to follow him.

May we make the same discovery, as his miracles refocus our attention, challenging us to follow Jesus as well.



CHAPTER 10

JESUS: MIRACLES OF THE MESSIAH

GOD'S SAVIOR HAS COME

Matthew—John

- [THE MIRACLE OF SINS FORGIVEN \(LUKE 5:18-26\)](#)
- [SEVEN SABBATH HEALINGS](#)
- [AN UNASKED-FOR MIRACLE \(LUKE 7:11-17\)](#)
- [DEMONS FLEE JESUS \(LUKE 8:27-39\)](#)
- [HOW MIRACLES PROVE JESUS' MESSIAHSHIP \(MATTHEW 9:27-35\)](#)
- [LEFT-OVER MIRACLES \(JOHN 6:1-14; MATTHEW 14:22-33\)](#)

What do Jesus' miracles tell us about Him? What did the miracles Jesus performed tell the people of His own day?

Centuries before Christ's birth the prophet Isaiah described the kind of miraculous healings that would mark the introduction of the messianic age. The recorded miracles of Jesus fulfilled this 700-year-old prophecy exactly!

The kind of miracles that Jesus performed—miracles done by no prophet before His appearance—were proof positive that Christ was the promised Messiah, the Savior of Israel!

JESUS CLEANSSES A LEPER [Mark 1:40-45](#); [Luke 5:12-15](#)

Jesus touched and healed a leper who appealed to him for help.

Background of the miracle. The leprosy of the Old and New Testament was any infectious skin disease. The social impact of the disease was even greater than its physical problems. While suffering from such a disease, a person was to be isolated from the community. To touch a leper made a person ritually unclean. [Leviticus 13:45](#) says, "His clothes shall be torn and his head bare, and he shall cover his mustache, and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!'" Other people were to be warned of the leper's unclean state so they could avoid contact.

Because this disease made a person ritually unclean, priests were given the duty of examining rashes to see if they should be classified as leprosy. Detailed instructions for making this diagnosis are included in the book of Leviticus. A person who recovered from leprosy was to go to a priest, who would examine him and pronounce him ritually clean again.

Parties to the miracle. In each report of this incident, the text mentions only Jesus and the leper. This was apparently a private miracle. Mark notes that it was the leper rather than others who "went out and began to proclaim" his cure freely (v. [45](#)).

Jesus. Mark emphasized Jesus' compassion for the leper who appealed to him for healing ([Mark 1:41](#)). Jesus healed the leper, not as a sign, but simply because he cared.

The leper. Luke described the man as "full of leprosy" ([Luke 5:12](#)). His case was severe, and he had probably been a leper for a long time. Yet this leper expressed confidence that Jesus could heal his disease if he chose to do so. The leper was right. Jesus could heal him—and he did.

How the story unfolds. The story is told abruptly, with only Matthew providing anything like a transition statement ([Matt. 8:1](#)). The leper saw Jesus, and fell down before him, begging for healing. Jesus responded by reaching out to touch the leper while saying "be cleansed." Instantly the leprosy was gone.

Jesus told the man to go to a priest, as the Old Testament required, so he could be certified as ritually clean. And, although Jesus warned the leper to tell no one, the leper was so excited by his cure that he couldn't help telling everyone he met what Jesus had done for him.



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“Lord, if you are willing” (Luke 5:12). The leper had no doubt about Jesus’ ability to cure him. But he was uncertain as to whether Jesus would be willing to do so. The rabbis thought leprosy was God’s punishment for slander, one of the most wicked sins in rabbinic eyes. The leper’s hesitant request may reflect his question, “Will Jesus help so great a sinner?”

Many people are burdened by guilt, and they wonder if God could possibly care for them. But Jesus’ response to the leper offers wonderful assurance and relief.

“Moved with compassion” (Mark 1:41). Mark takes us into the heart of Jesus and reveals what moved him to act. The Greek word for “compassion” is *splanchnizomai*, which depicts the emotions of pity, compassion, and love. Jesus *did* care, no matter what the leper’s past sins.

This word is not used often in the New Testament. But when the Gospels portray Jesus as being moved by compassion, his subsequent action usually marks the turning point in a person’s life. This was the case with the leper. And it can be true for us.

Whatever our past, whatever our failings or needs, Jesus does have compassion for us. And when we come to him for help, he will change our lives.

“He put out His hand and touched him” (Luke 5:13). The act was doubly significant.

It was a true expression of compassion. As much as the leper needed healing, his heart must have ached for the touch of another human hand. How terrible it must have been to see everyone draw back as he approached, lest they be contaminated by brushing against him. Jesus responded to the man’s heartache, giving him not only what he asked for—healing—but what he longed for as well—a human touch.

It was a stunning demonstration of spiritual power. According to the law, anything which touched an object or person who was ritually unclean became unclean itself. But Jesus’ touch had the opposite effect! It removed the disease which had made the man unclean.

“Go and show yourself to the priest” (5:14). Jesus instructed the cleansed leper to do what God’s Law required. Jesus’ conflicts with the Pharisees and others over “the law” was over their additions to the Old Testament, not over the Law itself.

“He charged him to tell no one” (5:14). It would be easy to criticize the healed leper for disobeying Jesus. Yet we can understand how he couldn’t keep silent. The joy he felt simply overflowed.

How strange it is—when Scripture urges us to tell others of the cleansing we have experienced through Jesus—that so many Christians keep silent. The leper was healed of a disease which cut him off from fellowship with other human beings. Christians have been cleansed from sins which once cut us off from personal relationship with God. How powerfully the joy of that cleansing should move us to share Christ’s love with others.

JESUS HEALS A PARALYTIC [Luke 5:18–26](#); [Matthew 9:2–7](#); [Mark 2:3–12](#)

Four friends carried a paralyzed man to Jesus. Jesus shocked onlookers by forgiving the man’s sins and then curing the paralysis.

Background of the miracle. Luke noted that as more and more people heard about Jesus, multitudes gathered to hear him and be healed ([Luke 5:15](#)). The furor apparently brought to Capernaum a delegation of “Pharisees and teachers of the Law,” made up of rabbis from Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. Their mission was to evaluate Jesus’ teaching.

On this particular day great crowds had gathered, and the delegation had seen Jesus heal many people ([Luke 5:17](#)). The delegation later met with Jesus inside a home, most likely Peter’s ([Luke 4:38](#)). These men represented the spiritual leaders of Judaism, and they were listening critically. They needed to decide how to deal with this young preacher who was working miracles and drawing such great crowds.

It was while Jesus was dealing with them that this interruption described in three of the Gospels took place.

The parties to the miracle. This miracle account carefully described the interaction between several parties. There was Jesus, who was presenting his teaching to the delegation sent to examine him. There was the delegation made up of Pharisees and teachers of the law. There was a paralyzed man and the friends who carried him to Jesus.



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Jesus. Jesus was clearly the focus of attention. Crowds had come to hear him, and he had healed many. In all this, he had been carefully observed by the delegation of religious leaders. When this miracle happened, he was in a room with his examiners. There is no hint that Jesus was making a defense of his teaching. Rather, he was actively instructing those who assumed they had the authority to evaluate him!

The Pharisees and teachers of the law. These were men who had undergone the rigorous training required of anyone in Judaism who wanted to become a spiritual leader. The term *Pharisee* was used to describe a small, dedicated core of people, mostly laymen, who were totally committed to keeping God's law as interpreted by the rabbis.

These men honored what was called the oral law—memorized interpretations of the written Law of Moses and legal rulings of earlier rabbis—as if it were the very word of God. Later they would become the enemies of Jesus. He ignored the oral Law and criticized the Pharisees for following precepts which canceled out the written Word of God.

At this point, these influential men had not made up their minds. Yet, like the teachers of the Law who were there with them, the Pharisees had come to judge Jesus by their standards. It had never occurred to them that their standards might be judged by Jesus' teachings!

The paralyzed man and his friends. These men are portrayed as individuals of persistent faith. They were determined to reach Jesus, because they firmly believed he could heal their friend.

There is a powerful contrast here. The Pharisees and law teachers came to Jesus to evaluate him. The paralytic and his friends came to Jesus for help. Faith recognizes its need for the things that only Jesus can provide. Unbelief assumes the right to judge God himself.

How the story unfolds. Jesus was inside a home teaching the investigating committee. The crowd had pressed around the house outside, hoping to overhear. When the paralytic was brought by his friends, there was no way to get through the crowds packed around the door and windows.

But the paralytic's friends were not about to give up. They climbed the outside staircase that led to the flat roof. These were typical features of Palestinian homes. They broke through the roof, letting the paralyzed man down into the room where Jesus was teaching. Mark pictured this graphically: they "dug through" (*apestgasan*) the layers of plaster, sticks, and mud used to construct the roof.

Jesus recognized their faith and responded to it. He declared, "Man, your sins are forgiven" ([Luke 5:20](#)). This shocked the delegation of religious leaders. Only God could forgive sins! Sensing their thoughts, Jesus challenged them. Was it easier to say, "your sins are forgiven" or to say "rise up and walk?" Then, to show that his words were authoritative, Jesus told the paralyzed man to get up, pick up the pallet on which he had been carried to the house, and walk home.

The man got up and carried his bed home. No one who comes to Jesus with faith goes away the same.

Luke concluded, "They were all amazed, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen strange things today" ([5:26](#)).

"When He saw their faith" ([Luke 5:20](#)). This is the first direct reference to faith in Luke's Gospel, although the issue of belief versus unbelief has already been raised (compare [Luke 1:20, 45](#)). But what does Luke mean by "faith"? In his Gospel and in Acts, faith is ascribed to persons who act decisively on the conviction that God's help is to be found in Jesus.

The persistence of the paralytic's friends demonstrated the reality of their faith. Biblical faith is more than wishful thinking. It is a confidence that Jesus can help which moves us to act according to his Word.

"Man, your sins are forgiven you" ([5:20](#)). The paralytic came for physical healing. Jesus first provided spiritual healing. Jesus would give the man what he wanted—but first he would give him what he *needed*. We can live with physical infirmities. But we cannot survive without God's forgiveness.

"Who is this who speaks blasphemies?" ([5:21](#)). We can almost hear the investigating committee breathe a sigh of astonishment. Now they could categorize Jesus!

"Who is this?" This was the question they had been sent to answer. Was Jesus really a messenger sent by God? Might he even be the Messiah? Or was he another of those fraudulent figures who often appeared on the religious



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scene, gained a few moments of notoriety, and then disappeared? How should the religious establishment react to him?

The wonder is that they needed to raise the question at all. All that day the delegation had seen Jesus heal. Later a man who had been given sight by Jesus would state the obvious: “Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where he is from.... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” ([John 9:30, 33](#)).

The teachers of the law and Pharisees who were so reluctant to acknowledge Jesus’ authority simply *had to know* that the miracle worker had come from God.

“*Who speaks blasphemies.*” Unwilling to accept the testimony of Jesus’ miracles about his identity, the delegation was quick to fasten on his words. Jesus had pronounced the paralytic’s sins forgiven.

In first-century Judaism, the forgiveness of sins was thought to be something God would announce only in the final day. Jesus spoke as if he had divine authority to forgive sins, although the scribes and Pharisees observed, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ([Luke 5:21](#); compare [Ps. 103:3](#); [Isa. 45:25](#)). What’s more, Jesus’ pronouncement also brought forgiveness into the realm of the present. To the Jewish leaders, this was blasphemy indeed.

Although the leaders did not announce then that Jesus was a blasphemer, this conclusion had been fixed in their mind. Although Jesus went on to prove that he had the authority to make such a pronouncement, the investigating commission had made up their minds. By their standards, what Jesus had said was blasphemous. This was enough to settle their attitude toward him.

Many people think it presumptuous for human beings to claim they know their sins are forgiven, and that they are assured of heaven. They consider this pride, as though we had confidence in our own goodness. But those who realize that Christ died for our sins so we might be forgiven do know the joy of redemption. Our forgiveness rests entirely on what Jesus did for us—not on what we do for ourselves.

“*Which is easier, to say?*” ([5:23](#)) Jesus was not asking whether it is easier to forgive sins or to heal paralysis. He was asking about *words*.

Do Jesus’ words have meaning? Jesus asked which is easier *to say*. The obvious answer is that it is easier to say sins are forgiven. It is easier because there is no way to tell whether such words have meaning. Forgiveness is a transaction that takes place between an individual and God. No one can peer into the heart to witness that inner transaction.

But if a person says to a paralytic, “Get up, pick up your pallet and go home,” there is an immediate and sure way to tell whether his words are empty. If the paralytic gets up and goes home, the words of the speaker are authoritative indeed. If the paralytic continues to lie there, the words of the speaker are meaningless.

“*That you may know*” ([Luke 5:24](#)). Jesus healed the paralytic as a witness to the investigating committee. Are the words of Jesus authoritative? Does he have the right (*exousia*) to forgive sins? To show how powerful his words were, Christ turned to the paralytic and told him to get up and go home.

“*And they were all amazed*” ([5:26](#)). An unusual Greek word is translated “amazed” in this passage. The word is *ekstasis*, from which our word *ecstasy* comes. In classical Greek, the word implied an intense but passing excitement. Here it conveyed a sense of astonishment. Luke filled in the portrait of the delegation’s reaction, for the “all” is best to be taken as referring primarily to the delegation in the room where Jesus taught.

“*They were all amazed.*” The miracle astonished the onlookers. What irony this is. These men, who claimed spiritual authority in Judaism because they had mastered the words of the written and oral law, had come to pass judgment on Jesus. But with a few brief statements, Jesus proved that the words he spoke were infused with an authority and power they could not match, or imagine.

The religious leaders spent their lives arguing about words. But not one of them could heal a paralytic. Yet they dared to assume they had the right to judge the teaching of a man whose words had miracle-working power!

“*They glorified God.*” Some take this statement as a positive assessment of the investigating committee’s reaction to Jesus’ miracle. It is not. The phrase more likely reflects the delegation’s unwillingness to give Jesus any credit at all!



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Later the religious leaders of Judaism would tell a blind man Jesus had healed, “Give God the glory! We know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner” ([John 9:24](#)). No miracle ever changed a closed heart. And this miracle didn’t change the conviction of the Pharisees or teachers of the Law that Jesus had committed blasphemy.

“*They were filled with fear*” (v. [26](#)). The Greek word used here is the most common term for fear—*phobos*. Frequently in the Gospels, when the religious leaders are described as being afraid, the fear makes them resist an impulse to attack Jesus (compare [Matt. 21:46](#); [Mark 12:12](#)). In the face of such a notable miracle, the delegation was afraid to take a stand against Jesus.

“*We have seen strange things today*” (v. [26](#)). We cannot imagine a more noncommittal expression. The delegation walked away, its members shaking their heads.

The healing of the paralytic proved that Jesus’ words rang with God’s authority, but the Pharisees withheld their stamp of approval. They were convinced that a teacher whose words did not agree with their understanding of God’s plan must be wrong. But not one had the courage to pronounce *anathema* on those who listened to what Jesus said. They would not risk exercising the religious authority they claimed, because the miracle had filled them with uncertainty and fear.

And so they shook their heads and went away. All anyone heard them say was, “Strange. Really strange.”

And strange indeed it is—strange not that Jesus should forgive or heal, but that human beings still tend to cling to wrong ideas about God in spite of the authoritative words spoken by Jesus. As we study miracle after miracle in the Gospels, may we have the faith to recognize Jesus for who he is and—like the paralytic—come to him.

JESUS HEALS AN INVALID AT BETHESDA [John 5:1–18](#)

Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years.

Background of the miracle. Jesus walked through a crowd of disabled people gathered around an open-air pool. Verse [4](#), which is not found in the more reliable Greek manuscripts, explains that they gathered there because they believed an angel stirred the waters occasionally. After this stirring, the first person into the pool would be healed.

This miracle took place on the Sabbath. The Old Testament decreed that a person should do no work on the Sabbath ([Ex. 20:8–10](#)). By Jesus’ time, the rabbis had expanded this simple command by going into great detail about what constituted “work.”

For instance, it was permissible to have a fire which kept water hot if the fire was built before the Sabbath. But cold water could not be added to the hot water, lest the cold be warmed. Heating water would constitute work. However, it was permissible to add hot water to cold water in a cup, on the theory that the cold would cool off the hot, and this would not be work (*Mishna*, Shabbat 3:5). It is not surprising that the religious leaders with such a mindset were shocked and angered at what Jesus did on the Sabbath.

Parties to the miracle. The text focuses on Jesus, the invalid, and “the Jews.” When John uses the phrase “the Jews,” he is referring to the religious leaders, not to the general population and certainly not to the Jewish people as a race.

Jesus. Jesus initiated a conversation with the invalid. People generally approached Jesus for healing, and they usually began the conversation. In this case, Jesus selected one from the many in need and initiated the conversation. It is also striking that Jesus walked through the crowd of the infirm unrecognized. While most would have heard of Jesus, there was nothing out of the ordinary about his appearance.

The invalid. The man had been bedridden for 38 years, and he was without hope of being cured. He had no idea who Jesus was. Even after his healing, when questioned by the religious leaders, the text says “the one who was healed did not know who it was” ([John 5:13](#)). There is no question about one thing: faith was not a condition of this healing.

The Jews. The Jewish leaders were scandalized that the man, after being healed, was carrying his bed (a cloth pallet). When they learned the miracle had been performed by Jesus, all they could think of was making an accusation against him “because he had done these things on the Sabbath” ([John 5:16](#)).

How the story unfolds. John organized his report of this miracle story into five vivid scenes.



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Scene 1. John sketched the setting, telling about the crowds of “sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed” lying near the pool. These were people we would classify as “incurable.” Their only hope was for a miracle. John then drew attention to a single individual: a man who had been an invalid for nearly four decades.

Scene 2. Jesus entered, walking through the crowd. He stopped before the invalid and asked him a question. The man’s answer revealed his hopelessness. After 38 years, he had lost not only the ability to move but also all hope. Without further comment, Jesus told the man to get up, pick up his bed, and walk. The invalid must have felt the strength flow back into his limbs, for he immediately got up and did as Jesus said. Jesus walked away and was lost in the crowds ([John 5:13](#)).

Scene 3. The man was spotted by “the Jews,” members of the religious establishment. They confronted him for carrying his pallet on the Sabbath. When the healed invalid told what had happened, the religious leaders interrogated him about who had instructed him to violate the Sabbath. The man replied that he didn’t know who he was.

Scene 4. Jesus found the man he had healed in the temple. He identified himself and warned the man to “sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you” (v. [14](#)). The man then hurried to the religious leaders and reported that it was Jesus who had made him well.

John commented on the leaders’ reaction: “The Jews persecuted Jesus” because he had done these things on the Sabbath ([John 5:16](#)). The phrase “and sought to kill him” is not in the best Greek texts, but it accurately reflects the intent of the religious leaders as described in other passages.

Scene 5. Later, the incident led to an open confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders, which featured an extended teaching by Jesus. This is a basic pattern in the Gospel of John—a miracle precedes a message. In this particular message, Jesus pointed out that his miracles demonstrated his intimate relationship with God the Father, and that he was to be honored as God. If the religious leaders truly believed the Old Testament, they would acknowledge Jesus, for the Scriptures testified to him.

“*A certain man*” ([John 5:5](#)). The characteristics of this man are significant. He had been an invalid for a long time. He didn’t expect to recover. He didn’t recognize Jesus or know who he was; thus, he was without faith. Even after being healed, he didn’t know Jesus. But later, when Christ found him, the man recognized the One who healed him.

This gives insight into God’s gracious working for the unsaved of every age. Are God’s miracles reserved only for the believer who knows the Lord and exercises faith in him? No, because Jesus showed his grace to an invalid who neither knew nor believed in him. God is free in his sovereignty to show grace to any human being, as he often does in unexplained healings and in other ways. How often an anonymous providence raises up those who do not know or acknowledge God.

Yet it is significant that the healing prepared the beneficiary in this story for a later meeting with Jesus. Jesus Christ was ultimately recognized as the source of blessing.

“*Do you want to be made well?*” ([John 5:6](#)). Jesus’ question was penetrating. It’s true that the invalid had lost much because of his illness. His limbs atrophied, and he lost the ability to move. He declared, “I have no man” to help. He lost the network of friends which those with a normal life typically build.

Yet for nearly four decades, the invalid had looked to others for alms. If he were healed, he would have to become responsible for himself. He would have to find work, to reenter a social world to which he is a stranger. “Do you want to be made well” is a valid question indeed.

How many today don’t really want to be well! How many who live on welfare fear the idea of assuming responsibility for themselves? How many invalids want to be dependent on their caregivers? How many who are spiritual invalids fear spiritual growth and commitment?

The sick man didn’t answer Jesus’ question. He offered an excuse, explaining why he couldn’t be made well. But note that Jesus didn’t wait for his answer. He said to him “Rise, take up your bed and walk” ([John 5:8](#)).

Perhaps the question, “Do you want to be well?” was raised to force us to face our own inner hesitancy. Maybe the command, “Rise, take up your bed and walk,” was uttered to remind us that we *are* to be responsible; that with God’s help we can walk—and carry our own load.



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“The Jews therefore said to him...” (5:10–12). When the invalid told them about his cure, the religious leaders gave not a single thought to the man or what the cure must have meant to him. They didn’t rejoice with him or seem to care. All they wanted was to find the person who had violated their rules on Sabbath behavior so they could confront him!

When in the name of religion we lose our capacity to care about others, there is something wrong with our religion.

“The one who was healed did not know” (5:13). The healing of the invalid was an act of sovereign grace. There was no appeal by the invalid to Jesus; he exercised no faith—he didn’t even know who Jesus was.

“Jesus found him in the temple” (John 5:14). The healed man didn’t go looking for Jesus. Perhaps this would have been an impossible task, because Jerusalem was crowded during religious festivals (compare [John 5:1](#)). But Jesus did go looking for the man.

It’s significant that Jesus found the man in the temple. He may have gone there to thank God for his healing. Or perhaps the religious leaders had taken him there to be questioned about the incident.

In any case, Jesus found him—and warned him. “You have been made well. Sin no more” ([John 5:14](#)). A literal translation of the Greek is “don’t keep on sinning.” Some interpreters point out that the phrase suggests that when Jesus healed the man’s body, he also forgave his sins. Others emphasize the connection between sickness and sin in the Bible. But it is more likely that when Jesus warned “lest a worse thing come upon you,” he was speaking of the spiritual consequences of sin.

“The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus” (5:15). The man has been criticized for “betraying” Jesus. Yet Christ didn’t try to hide his miracles, nor is there any indication that Jesus told the healed invalid not to tell anyone what had happened. In fact, when the leaders hurried to accuse Jesus, he used the occasion to state his true identity and to press his claim for Israel’s allegiance.

While we as believers are commissioned to tell others about Jesus, we are not responsible for their response. Perhaps we should grant this man who was healed the same consideration.

“Because he had done these things on the Sabbath” (5:16). We have already noted the extreme emphasis on Sabbath-keeping that characterized the Pharisees and experts in biblical Law. The Gospels record seven Sabbath healings. Several of them led to serious confrontations with the religious establishment. The seven are:

1. Jesus healed the demoniac in the synagogue at Capernaum. See page 171.
2. Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law. See page 174.
3. Jesus healed the cripple at Bethesda. See page 186.
4. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. See page 190.
5. Jesus healed a man born blind. See page 222.
6. Jesus healed a woman bound by Satan. See page 225.
7. Jesus healed a man with dropsy. See page 227.

“But Jesus answered them” (5:17). The incident gave Jesus an opportunity to confront the assumptions of the religious leaders and to state his claims openly. The text indicates that Christ’s claims were clearly understood. “The Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was his Father, making himself equal with God” (v. [18](#)).

The religious leaders didn’t reject Christ out of some misunderstanding of who he claimed to be. They understood his claims perfectly, and they rejected him *because of these claims*.

The larger meaning of the miracle. The miracle displayed the power of God to act in sovereign grace on behalf of anyone whom he chooses. Miracles don’t depend on our faith: God is free to work with or without our cooperation.

The miracle also showed that God is willing to touch the lives of those who do not know him. His compassion is not limited to members of his spiritual family.



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More significantly, the miracle Jesus performed on the Sabbath supported his claim to be One with the Father. He acted as sovereign Lord, choosing to show grace to whomever he wished. He acted on the Sabbath, asserting his Lordship over that holy day. And the nature of his miracle—restoring a hopeless invalid—suggests what Christ’s power can do if we heed the gospel call to arise and walk with him throughout life.

JESUS HEALS A MAN WITH A WITHERED HAND [Luke 6:6–10](#); [Matthew 12:9–14](#); [Mark 3:1–6](#)

Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, infuriating the Pharisees and scribes [experts in Mosaic Law].

Background of the miracle. This is another of Jesus’ Sabbath miracles (see the list on page 189). Jesus’ performance of miracles on the Sabbath angered the religious establishment, which had defined in minute fashion every action a person could perform on the holy day. They had gone far beyond the simple Old Testament prescription for observance of the Sabbath. The charge that Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker was one of the most serious the Jewish leaders lodged against Jesus.

Parties to the miracle. The individuals who interacted in this miracle account were Jesus, the man with the withered hand, and “the scribes and Pharisees.”

Jesus. In this account Jesus was the central figure, confronting the religious leaders whose efforts to discredit him were constantly frustrated. Jesus is also portrayed as a truly godly person who, unlike the leaders, had a deep concern for disabled man.

The man with the withered hand. He was the silent beneficiary of Jesus’ compassion and power. We know little about this man except that he was there and Jesus healed him.

The scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees were committed to strict observance of Israel’s Law. The “scribes” were men whose status was based on a knowledge of the Old Testament and what was known as the oral law—the rulings of earlier and contemporary rabbis. In the Gospels they are also called “lawyers,” and “experts in the Law.”

This passage shows these men in a bad light. They gathered in the synagogue not to worship but to find some charge against Jesus. They watched intently to see what Jesus would do for the man with the withered hand, not because they cared about his suffering, but so they could criticize and condemn if Jesus healed him. They are displayed as vindictive and heartless, more concerned about themselves and their privileged position than the people they led.

How the story unfolds. Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. In the congregation was a man with a withered hand. Scribes and Pharisees were also there, hoping Jesus would heal the man so they could accuse him of Sabbath-breaking.

Jesus interrupted his teaching and told the man with the withered hand to stand. As all eyes shifted toward the disabled man, Jesus challenged the religious leaders. He asked them “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or destroy?”

Jesus glared angrily at each scribe and Pharisee ([Mark 3:5](#)), but they remained silent. Jesus then told the man to stretch out his withered hand, and Christ restored it. The scribes and Pharisees remained silent, but they seethed with internal anger at this healing. Later they discussed “what they might do to Jesus” ([Luke 6:11](#)).

“A man was there” ([Luke 6:6](#)). Many have suggested that the scribes and Pharisees *arranged* for the man to be in the synagogue that morning. Their own presence—and the intentness with which they watched—does seem to suggest a trap!

“That they might find an accusation against him” ([6:7](#)). These men were completely closed to what Jesus was teaching. Their only concern was finding evidence on which they might accuse him of lawbreaking.

“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?” ([6:9](#)). The rabbis did make exceptions to the Sabbath laws on work in order to “do good.” For instance, giving alms was considered a major good work in Judaism. Yet, to give alms required carrying a coin or some food and transferring it from one person to another. On the Sabbath, it was unlawful to put something in the beggar’s bowl, or to carry something outside the house to give to him. But the Mishna said,

[If] the beggar stuck his hand inside, and the
householder [took something] from it,



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or if [the householder] put something in it and he [the beggar] removed it, both of them are exempt (SHABBAT, III. J-L).

Again, the Mishna dealt with exceptions to putting out an oil lamp. If this were done to save the wick, it would be work—because to put out a wick was considered an action which turned it into charcoal. However,

he who puts out a lamp because he is afraid of gentiles, thugs, a bad spirit, or if it is so that a sick person might sleep, is exempt [from punishment] (SHABBAT V 2:5 A-C).

It is clear, then, that even the scribes and Pharisees recognized in principle that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath. In the synagogue that morning, Jesus' unanswered question showed up these scribes and Pharisees as hypocritical and heartless.

No wonder they raged inside ([Luke 6:11](#)). With a few words and a miracle of compassion, Jesus exposed their wickedness. They had no sense of guilt, but they were very sensitive to shame. And Jesus shamed them in front of everyone.

“He... looked around at them with anger” ([Mark 3:4](#)). Jesus felt compassion for the man with the withered hand. But he was angered by the heartlessness of the scribes and Pharisees. By having such disregard for another human being in need, these men who claimed to set the standard of piety in Israel had actually betrayed the God they claimed to honor.

Orthodoxy of the head without orthodoxy of the heart is an insult to God.

The meaning of the miracle. In addition to revealing the power of Jesus, this miracle contrasted the attitude of Jesus and the religious leaders of his time toward human beings. To Jesus, people were precious and their needs were paramount. To the Pharisees, ordinary people were nothing but *am ha-eretz*, “people of the land,” commoners whose lack of dedication to the details of the law made them contemptible.

How amazing that to God each of us is of immeasurable worth, no matter what others may think of us. Those who dismiss any person with contempt reveal how far they are from the heart of God.

JESUS HEALS A CENTURION’S SERVANT [Matthew 8:5-13](#); [Luke 7:1-10](#)

A Roman army officer appealed to Jesus to heal his servant, displaying an amazing faith in Christ’s power.

Background of the miracle. Centurions were the working officers of the Roman army. The title comes from the fact that they originally led one hundred men [from a term for a “century”]. They were intelligent and well-paid, typically staying in the military beyond the normal twenty-year enlistment. When discharged, centurions received a large bonus and generally became influential citizens of the cities in which they settled. In every mention of centurions in the New Testament, they are presented in a positive light (see also [Mark 15:39](#); [Acts 10:2](#); [27:43](#)).

We do not know whether this centurion was retired or on active duty in Capernaum. We do know that the elders of the Jews interceded on his behalf—an unusual thing for a Jew to do for a Gentile. But their description of the centurion was also unusual. Most people in the Roman forces occupying Palestine were antagonistic toward the Jews. But this centurion was described by Jews as one who “loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue” ([Luke 7:5](#)).

The story appears in both Matthew and Luke. The details differ in the two accounts, but these are easily reconciled. The heart of the story is the same in each Gospel.

Parties to the miracle. Combining the two accounts, we see the following persons interacting in this miracle account: Jesus, the Jewish elders of Capernaum, the centurion, the sick servant, and friends whom the centurion sent to meet Jesus.

Jesus. In this story, Jesus is portrayed as the reliable object of an unusual faith. The centurion counted on Jesus far more than did the Jews to whom Jesus was sent. This is perhaps a foreshadowing of the church. In the book of Acts, far more Gentiles than Jews responded in faith to the message of the gospel.



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The centurion. Several things about the centurion are attractive. He had a deep concern for a servant. The Greek word is *doulos*, “slave.” In the hellenistic world, slaves were property. It was unusual for an important person to be concerned over a slave’s well-being. In addition, the centurion had made an effort to understand the people among whom he was assigned. Rather than hold the Jews and their religion in contempt, this army officer had come to love the people and to honor their God. He was apparently a person of faith as well.

The centurion’s slave. The only thing we know about this slave is that he was “lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented” ([Matt. 8:6](#)). This is all we need to know about another person. If someone is hurting and we can help, it is our duty to respond.

The Jewish elders. These were the leading men or civil rulers of Capernaum rather than the scribes and Pharisees who made up the religious establishment. They interceded for the centurion to let Jesus know they considered him worthy of help, even though he was a Gentile who had no real claim to mercy from a Jewish prophet.

The centurion’s friends. [Luke 7:6](#) indicates that at one point the centurion sent friends to meet Jesus and to express the centurion’s awareness that he was unworthy of welcoming Jesus into his home. This showed the centurion’s sensitivity, for a strict Jew would consider himself defiled if he entered the house of a Gentile.

How the story unfolds. A centurion who lived in Capernaum, where Jesus had performed many miracles, had a sick slave about whom he was deeply worried. When the centurion heard that Jesus had returned to the city, he asked the Jewish elders of the city to intercede for his servant ([Luke 7:3–5](#)). Jesus heard them and started off with them toward the centurion’s house.

The group was not far from the centurion’s home when several of his friends meet Jesus with a message: the centurion realized he was “not worthy that You should enter under my roof.” The centurion did not feel worthy to approach Christ in person ([Luke 7:6, 7](#)). But the centurion, as an army officer, understood how authority worked. So if Jesus would just say the word, he knew that his slave would be healed.

But the centurion was so concerned about the torment experienced by his slave that he couldn’t wait. A few moments later, he himself arrived to plead for his slave ([Matt. 8:6](#)), personally expressing his confidence that Jesus need only say the word and his slave would be healed.

Both Gospel writers indicate that Jesus “marveled,” and told the crowds that “I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel” ([Luke 7:9](#); [Matt. 8:10](#)).

Matthew followed up by quoting Jesus’ warning to Israel. People from all over the world would respond with faith to Jesus as the centurion has and have a share in the kingdom promised to Abraham. But the “sons of the kingdom” would be cast into outer darkness ([Matt. 8:11, 12](#)).

Then Jesus dismissed the centurion. “As you have believed, so let it be done for you.” And the slave was healed “that same hour” ([Matt. 8:13](#)).

The two accounts. Many interpreters have seen “errors” in these two Gospel accounts, arguing that the discrepancies disprove the doctrine of inspiration. But are the differences really errors? The narrative above integrates the two accounts easily, showing how the details in one Gospel supplement rather than contradict the details in the other.

But why the differences? Each Gospel writer had his own theme and audience in mind as he selected details to include in his account. Matthew’s account doesn’t mention the centurion’s relationship with Jews. Matthew’s account contrasts the faith-response of this Gentile with the lack of faith exhibited by Jesus’ own people. The story is not only a miracle account but also an acted-out parable. Israel must respond with a faith like this Gentile’s, or it will lose any privileges it counted on through physical descent from Abraham.

Luke, on the other hand, emphasizes the human dimension of Jesus’ ministry. He, the elders, and the centurion are all part of a community. The Gentile centurion respects the Jews and their religion; the Jewish elders intercede for this Gentile with Jesus; Jesus willingly goes with them to the centurion’s home. In Luke the thing that binds all the parties to the miracle together is a common faith in Jesus.

The elders appeal to Jesus for healing; the centurion exhibits an even greater faith than theirs. There is no warning to Israel in Luke, because Luke is intent on showing that through a common faith in Jesus the barriers that separate people can be broken down.



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Luke, writing to the Hellenistic world that idealized harmony between peoples, shows that such harmony is possible when people have a common faith in Jesus Christ. Matthew, writing to Jews, is intent on showing his Jewish brothers and sisters that faith in Jesus is a matter of life and death.

In each Gospel, the focus is on faith in Jesus and an understanding of the source of his authority. But the details selected by each writer explore the implications of faith in a way that is appropriate to his audience.

“I also am a man placed under authority” ([Luke 7:8](#); [Matthew 8:9](#)). The centurion explained what he meant with an illustration. He has soldiers under him. When he says “go,” they go. As one “under authority,” his right to command is rooted in his connection with the Roman emperor—the source of all authority in the Roman Empire. The soldiers did not obey him as a person but as a representative of the emperor.

Under whose authority then was Jesus? The answer is that Jesus’ connection was with God—the source of all authority in his universe. It follows that Jesus need not come to see the slave to heal him. Jesus only had to speak the word. Because Christ spoke with God’s authority, the centurion knew that if Jesus commanded it, his servant would be healed. This is faith indeed.

While the Jewish people witnessed Jesus’ miracles and wondered, the centurion saw them and believed. How ironic. The meaning of Christ’s miracles was clear to a Gentile military man, while God’s chosen people hesitated and held back.

“The sons of the kingdom will be cast out” ([Matthew 8:12](#)). The Jews of the first century believed that in addition to any personal merit they might gain from keeping the Law and from good works, they also accrued merit from the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, not only was the nation God’s chosen people; individuals were also given a boost in their efforts to earn salvation by their descent from Abraham.

Jesus’ warning cut against this belief which was entrenched in rabbinic Judaism. What won the centurion Jesus’ commendation was not his ancestry but his “great faith.” Jesus went on to say that many people outside the Jewish nation [the meaning of “from east and west”] would have a place in the kingdom of heaven. Ancestry has nothing to do with salvation. The kingdom of heaven is for those who, like Abraham ([Gen. 15:7](#)) and the centurion, have faith in Christ.

This is true for us today. It’s not what we do for God that wins us a place in his kingdom. It is faith in what God through Jesus has done for us.

JESUS RAISES A WIDOW’S SON [Luke 7:11–17](#)

Jesus stopped a funeral procession and raised the only son of a widow.

Background of the miracle. Jesus had an itinerant ministry, traveling especially throughout the province of Galilee (compare [Matt. 4:23](#)). Luke places one of these journeys the day after the healing of the centurion’s slave (see p. 191). Jesus came to the city of Nain, which was not far from Nazareth. As Jesus arrived, a large crowd was following a funeral procession.

Jewish custom required that a person be buried the day he or she died. The body was carried not in a coffin, as our text suggests, but in an open wicker bier. It was considered important for people to join a funeral procession as it passed by, so the mourners could be accompanied as a loved one was laid to rest. Thus, the raising of the widow’s son was witnessed by many.

Parties to the miracle. The central figures in the drama were Jesus, the widow, her son, and the crowd accompanying the bier.

Jesus. Although Luke emphasizes the human side of Jesus, this is the only miracle report in which Luke mentions Jesus’ compassion. In contrast, Christ’s compassion for the hurting is mentioned three times in Matthew ([14:14](#); [15:32](#); [20:34](#)) and three times in Mark ([1:41](#); [6:34](#); [8:2](#)). No one in this report either asked for or expected the miracle which Jesus performed.

The widow. Luke indicates that Jesus had compassion “on her” ([Luke 7:13](#)). While Luke portrays her tears, he also introduces two special reasons for Jesus’ emotional response. First, the dead man was her only son. And second, the woman was a widow.

The plight of a widow in biblical times is expressed in this saying of Rabbi Eliezer, “A slave gains when he acquires freedom from his master, but for a woman it is a liability, for she becomes disqualified from receiving



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terumah and loses her maintenance” (bGitt. 12:b). A wife was vulnerable in the ancient world. While her husband lived, he assumed the responsibility of her support. When he died, she was left on her own.

The problem was complicated in this case by the fact that in first-century Judaism, women could not inherit property from their husbands. Family property passed to the sons or, in exceptional cases, to a daughter. While there were systems by which wealthy husbands could provide support for their wives after death, the typical Galilean family had little. So it fell to the oldest son to care for his mother, in accord with the commandment, “Honor your father and your mother” ([Ex. 20:12](#)).

But the widow of Nain was truly a tragic figure. She had lost her husband, and now their only son, so that she herself was left destitute. No wonder Jesus had compassion on her!

The dead son. When Jesus raised the widow’s son, he addressed him as “young man” (v. [14](#)). The term suggests he was unmarried and had no children.

The crowd. The reaction of this crowd to Jesus’ miracle contrasted starkly with the healing of a paralyzed man ([Luke 5:26](#)). In that healing, the religious leaders glorified God *instead of* giving Jesus any credit. In this case, the crowd glorified God because “a great prophet has risen up among us” ([Luke 5:16](#)).

How the story unfolds. Jesus “happened” to reach Nain just as a funeral procession was leaving. Jesus felt compassion on the widow. He told the widow not to weep and placed his hand on the bier to stop the procession. He then addressed the young man, commanding him, “Arise.” Restored to life, the young man sat up, began to speak, and was presented by Jesus to the widowed mother. The crowd was awed, and they glorified God for raising up a prophet in Israel once again.

“Young man, I say to you, arise” ([Luke 7:14](#)). Several of the miracles of Jesus have been compared to those performed by Elijah and Elisha in the eighth century B.C. Like these two prophets, each of whom restored a dead person to life, Jesus also raised the dead. But there is a significant difference in the description of the process. Elijah and Elisha prayed, waited, and even stretched themselves out on the dead bodies before their return to life. Jesus did not appeal to God. He simply spoke to the dead, and the young man revived.

Christ had power *in himself* to raise the dead, for he *was* God.

The comparison between Jesus and the earlier prophets was not lost on the witnesses. Their happy cry, “A great prophet has risen up among us,” reflects their immediate association of Jesus with Elijah and Elisha.

“God has visited his people” ([7:16](#)). The phrase is idiomatic, meaning “God is again acting for us!” The miracles that had marked God’s intervention for Israel in the past were now being performed by Jesus. Surely history had again reached a major turning point!

“When the Lord saw her” ([Luke 7:13](#)). Luke earlier reported conversations in which others called Jesus “Lord” ([Luke 5:8, 12; 7:6](#)). But this is the first time Luke referred to Jesus as “the Lord.” With this miracle, Luke expected his readers to recognize who Jesus was.

The meaning of the miracle. The miracle at Nain had great religious significance. First, it revealed Jesus’ compassion. Second, it established the unlimited extent of Jesus’ power. He exercised control over demons ([Luke 4:33–36, 41](#)), disease ([Luke 5:12–15; 5:17–26](#)), and now even death ([Luke 7:11–17](#)). Third, its correspondence to miracles performed by Elijah and Elisha marked Jesus unmistakably as a prophet in the eyes of the people.

But there is perhaps an even more important message. In this miracle of restored life, Jesus took the initiative. He saw the need, felt compassion, reached out to touch the dead man, and restored him to life. What a clear picture this is of our salvation. We did not seek God. As lost sinners, we were hostile to God and counted among his enemies because of our wicked works ([Col. 1:21](#)). But God had compassion on us. God took the initiative. He sent his Son to earth, and in his death on Calvary Jesus reached out to touch us. In this act, he did more than restore physical life. The crucified and risen Christ provided forgiveness and eternal life.

Jesus took the initiative. All we can do is to accept by faith the wonderful gift of life that he alone can give.



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JESUS STILLS A STORM [Mark 4:35–41](#); [Luke 8:22–25](#); [Matthew 8:23–27](#)

Jesus was asleep in a small boat when a sudden squall threatened to sink it. The terrified disciples awoke Jesus, who calmed the storm and used the incident to teach them about faith.

Background to the miracle. The Sea of Galilee lies between high hills. Sudden winds funneled between these hills can whip up the waters and create waves that endanger small boats. However, even the fishermen who were in the boat with Jesus were terrified by this storm, convinced they were about to die.

This miracle account is a favorite of most believers. Nearly every sentence in the brief story has immediate application to our lives.

Parties to the miracle. This is one of several “private miracles” performed for the benefit of Jesus’ disciples. This miracle not only saved them but instructed them as well. The parties to this miracle were Jesus and an unspecified number of his disciples.

Jesus. Jesus was exhausted after a full day of ministry, and was asleep in the boat. The image of Jesus asleep while the storm raged around them is a vivid portrait of his calm confidence in God.

When Jesus was awakened by his terrified disciples, he immediately took charge, commanding the churning waters to “be still” ([Mark 4:39](#)). Jesus then used the experience to teach the disciples about faith by challenging them to evaluate their reaction during the storm.

The disciples. When the storm struck, the disciples were navigating the boat while Jesus slept. As the storm grew worse, they became terrified. Finally they woke Jesus up. When Christ commanded the storm to stop and the waters immediately become calm, the disciples were fearful and amazed. They asked each other, “Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” ([Mark 4:41](#)).

How the story unfolds. Jesus slept as the disciples sailed a fishing boat toward the opposite shore of the Sea of Galilee. A terrible storm struck suddenly. The terrified fisherman, certain the boat was about to sink, awakened Jesus. He stopped the storm and rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith. The amazed disciples voiced the question Mark wanted his readers to consider: “Who can this be?”

“He... rebuked the wind” ([Mark 4:39](#)). We have seen this term *rebuked* used by Jesus when casting out a demon (page 174) and when healing sickness (page 171). It is a word which indicates the subduing of an evil power. Some have taken its use here to indicate that Satan was behind the strong storm that struck while Jesus slept. In this view, Jesus’ “rebuke” was of the demonic beings behind the storm.

This suggestion is unlikely. Ever since the Fall, nature itself has been turned against humanity ([Gen. 3:17, 18](#)) and mankind has become vulnerable to all sorts of natural disasters. The miracle is intended to show Jesus’ power over nature itself, and so to suggest his deity. The Creator alone can control material creation. Jesus’ action that day recalled the words of [Psalm 89:8, 9](#).

O Lord God of hosts,
Who is mighty like You, O Lord?
Your faithfulness also surrounds You.
You rule the raging of the sea;
When its waves rise, You still them.

The answer to the disciples’ question, “Who can this be?” had been provided long ago in the Word of God.

Personal application of the miracle account. This miracle account is a favorite of believers perhaps because it speaks so clearly and directly to each of us in our own lives.

- The great windstorm represents the storms we face in our lives.
- The boat represents our security, which is threatened by the waves beating into it.
- Jesus asleep in the boat represents the apparent silence of God when we are overcome by stress or fear.
- The cry “do You not care that we are perishing” ([Mark 4:38](#)) expresses our own deep feelings of abandonment by God when life overwhelms us.



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- Jesus' rebuke of the wind and sea remind us of Christ's sovereign control over every circumstance in our lives.
- The calm that followed immediately after the storm symbolizes the inner calm we can experience when we rely on Jesus' love and his Word.
- Jesus' rebuke, "Why are you so fearful?" ([Mark 4:40](#)), reminds us that when Jesus is in our lives, we must trust him, even when life's storms intensify.
- Jesus' question, "How is it that you have no faith?" invites us to remember all that Christ has done for us in the past. Remembering yesterday's goodness strengthens the faith we need to face today and tomorrow.
- The disciples' fear reminds us always to hold Jesus in awe, remembering that he truly is God.
- The question, "Who can this be?" is answered by the miracle and the Scriptures. We are to concentrate on him, and not let life's circumstances confuse or distract us.

JESUS DELIVERS A DEMONIAK IN GEDARA [Luke 8:27-39](#); [Matthew 8:28-34](#); [Mark 5:1-20](#)

Jesus met a violent man who terrorized the region of Gedara, and cast many demons out of him.

Background of the miracle. Demon possession was a reality in New Testament times, as it is in our own day. For a fascinating exploration of this subject, see *Every Good and Evil Angel in the Bible*.

Mark and Luke give lengthy reports of this miracle, and each writer mentions only one demonized man. Matthew mentions two men and identifies the area where the miracle took place as Gergesa rather than Gerasa (Mark; see the NKJV footnote to [Luke 8:26](#)). The variants in the names are not a major problem, because one refers to a town and the other to a district in the general area of Decapolis [the "ten cities"], which was Gentile territory.

The discrepancy between the number of demonized men has led some interpreters to argue that one of the Gospel accounts must be in error. But one authority makes this point:

Suppose you told a friend, "Jim was at the party but came late," while another person told the same friend, "Jim and Carl came late to the party." Should you be charged with an error because you failed to mention Carl when telling about Jim? Of course not. Why then should the New Testament be charged with an error because Matthew mentions two demon-possessed men while Mark and Luke tell about only one? (*Bible Difficulties Solved*, Baker, 237).

The fact is that the basic elements in each Gospel are the same, and there is no major conflict among these three different accounts. For the sake of simplicity, our discussion will draw from the accounts in Mark and Luke. They are longer and more detailed than Matthew's version.

Parties to the miracle. The interaction in the story focuses our attention on Jesus, the demonized man, the demon, and the people of the region.

Jesus. Again, Jesus is shown to be in complete control in a confrontation with a demon. Although the many demons exercised control of an individual, Jesus' power over the demons was undiminished.

The demonized man. The contrast between the condition of the man while dominated by demons and after Jesus expelled them is sharply drawn.

The symptoms of extreme demon possession seen in this man include the following:

- Disregard for personal dignity (nakedness, [Luke 8:27](#)).
- Withdrawal from society ([Luke 8:27](#)).
- Disregard for normal comforts (lived in the tombs, [Luke 8:27](#)).
- Affinity for unclean, isolated locations (lived in tombs, [Luke 8:27](#)).
- Violence against others ([Luke 8:29](#)).
- Unusual physical strength ([Luke 8:29](#)).



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- Inarticulate speech ([Mark 5:5](#)).
- Self mutilation ([Mark 5:5](#)).

Perhaps the decisive demonstration of possession was the recognition by the demon of Jesus ([Luke 8:30](#)) and forced submission to him ([Luke 8:31](#)).

What a contrast we see in [Luke 8:35](#), which describes the man who had been freed from the control of demons as “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” The evil powers which had dominated him were gone, and the transformation was evident to all.

The demon. The demon had complete control of the man, and spoke through his voice. The name “Legion” was descriptive rather than personal. The name was appropriate because many demons had taken up residence in the victim’s personality. But it is also clear from each account that the demons had to acknowledge the sovereignty of Jesus and to do whatever Christ commanded.

The people of the region. The people of the region reacted strangely to the miracle. Rather than see the possibilities for healing of their own sick by Jesus, they felt only a terror of the unknown, and they begged Jesus to leave the region.

How the story unfolds. Jesus sailed with his disciples across the Sea of Galilee to Gentile territory. As soon as he landed, he was met by a demon-possessed man. The demon was forced to his knees before Jesus, for he recognized Christ as the “Son of the Most High God,” and begged Jesus not to “torment me.” The demon confessed that his name was Legion, “because many demons had entered him.”

The demons, fully exposed, begged Jesus to let them enter a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus permitted them to do so, but the pigs ran into the sea and drowned.

The demonized man was fully restored and listening to Jesus when people from the area hurried to this location to find out what had happened. They were so terrified by the supernatural events that they begged Jesus to leave their territory.

When the restored man asked permission to go with Jesus, Christ sent him home, encouraging him to “tell what great things God had done for you.”

“He lived in the tombs” ([Luke 8:27](#)). Tombs as the resting place of the dead were ritually unclean for Jews. It is fascinating to note that the demons in this man begged to enter pigs, who were also ritually unclean. The account is thus bracketed by references to the unclean places preferred by demons. This underlines their own corrupt and corrupting nature (see [Luke 8:29](#), which calls the demon an “unclean spirit”).

“What have I to do with you” ([8:28](#)). The Greek saying, “What to me and to you,” is both an admission of Jesus’ superiority and an expression of the demon’s desire to distance himself from Christ.

“I beg You, do not torment me” ([8:28](#)). The demon’s cry may sound pitiful. But that demon had no pity on the man whom he tormented. Although Jesus had commanded the demon to leave the man, and the demon had to obey, he begged Jesus for a concession.

“Legion, because many demons had entered him” ([8:30](#)). There were 6,000 men in a fully staffed Roman legion. This name doesn’t necessarily mean there were 6,000 demons infecting this victim. It does indicate what the text states: that “many demons had entered him.”

We know little about how a demon settles into the personality and gains control over a person. This passage reminds us that more than one demon can express itself through individuals who become vulnerable to possession. Satanism and demon possession are often depicted by movie producers who know nothing of the terrible reality. This encourages the foolish to seek out such experiences.

“Into the abyss” ([8:31](#)). The “abyss” is a place in which some of the angels who fell with Satan are currently confined, awaiting God’s final judgment (see [2 Pet. 2:4](#); [Jude 6](#)).

“He permitted them” ([8:32](#)). Christ’s control over the demons was so complete that they could not act of their own volition. They could do only what Jesus permitted them to do. It is ironic that the demons begged to be permitted to enter other living beings, even animals. Yet as soon as they entered the pigs, they dashed into the sea and were drowned. What God permits the evil spirits to do always proves to be their undoing.



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“The whole multitude... asked him to depart” (8:37). The interesting thing about this request is that it was made after the people of the region had carefully examined what had happened. They “heard” reports of what had happened ([Luke 8:34](#)), and then “went out to see what had happened” ([Luke 8:35](#)). When they saw the demonized man fully restored, they inquired and learned “by what means he who had been demon possessed was healed” ([Luke 8:36](#)). Yet, after going through this process and learning the facts, the “whole multitude” asked Jesus to leave.

How amazing! Were they afraid Jesus’ powers would be turned against them? Were they worried about the possible fate of other herds of pigs? Couldn’t they see what Jesus’ powerful, healing presence might mean to them and their loved ones?

We can’t understand how these people, after such careful examination, could turn Jesus away! This is a powerful reminder to us that while the facts call for full commitment to Jesus, commitment remains a matter of faith.

“Jesus sent him” (8:38, 39). The man Jesus had restored wanted to go with Jesus. Instead, Jesus sent him to his “own house” to “tell what great things God has done for you.” Christ still has a mission for those who make the commitment of faith to him. And it is the same mission on which the man freed from demons was sent. We are to go to our “own house”—our own family, our own coworkers, our own neighborhood—and tell what God has done for us.

The message of the miracle. The miracle accounts emphasize the total control the demons had gained over their victim. Yet that control was easily broken by Jesus. He easily expelled not one but many demons. The response of the Gerasenes and the freed victim portray the two possible responses we can make to Jesus. The miracle itself emphasizes the absolute and total authority of Jesus over all in the spiritual realm that might harm us.

JESUS HEALS A HEMORRHAGING WOMAN [Luke 8:43–48](#); [Matthew 9:20–22](#); [Mark 5:25–34](#)

While Jesus was on his way to respond to a father’s desperate appeal for help, he was touched by a woman with an unstoppable menstrual flow. She touched the hem of his clothing and was healed.

Background to the miracle. The condition of the woman with the flow of blood is far more serious than we might imagine. The medical complications are significant enough, for the constant loss of blood drains the victim of iron and other vital minerals. But in Judaism, such a flow of blood also made the woman ritually unclean.

The menstruant was *niddah*, and prohibited from having sexual relations. Rabbi Yoshaayah taught that a man should separate from his wife when she even *neared* her period. Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai, in commenting on [Leviticus 15:31](#), announced that “he who does not separate from his wife near her period, even if he has sons like the sons of Aaron, they will die.”

The problem for the woman who sought out Jesus was even more acute. Menstruant women transferred their impurity to whatever they touched, including household implements and their contents. The rabbis decreed that even the corpse of a woman who died during her period had to undergo a special purification with water (*tNidd.9.16*). Thus the woman in this miracle account was not only cut off from her husband but also disqualified from the contribution she would normally have made to the family. And this had been the woman’s experience for twelve long years ([Luke 8:43](#))!

It is no wonder that, as Luke relates, she had “spent all her livelihood on physicians” ([Luke 8:43](#)). The tragedy was that although she had spent all she had, she “could not be healed by any.”

Parties to the miracle. There seem to be only two parties to this miracle—Jesus, and the woman—although Peter has a small speaking part. Yet there is one other person who is not mentioned in this story of a miracle within a miracle. And that is Jairus, the anxious father of a dying daughter who had asked Jesus to treat her.

Jesus. Jesus had set out on an urgent mission, but he stopped when he felt “power going out from Me” ([Luke 8:46](#)). Christ was so filled with healing power that it was unnecessary for him to direct it. The miracle emphasizes the intrinsic power that resides in Christ.

The woman. Mark makes a point of this woman’s reaction when Jesus stopped in the middle of the crowd and asked who touched him. She was “fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to her” ([Mark 5:33](#)). The fear and trembling she felt may have been anxiety over Christ’s reaction to being touched by an “unclean” woman. Any of the religious leaders of the time would have been horrified and angry, for her touch would have made *them* unclean. What the woman did not yet realize was that Christ had such a vitalizing holiness that a simple touch from him cleansed the unclean.



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Peter. Mark describes “the disciples” reaction to Jesus’ question about who touched him, while Luke casts Peter as the spokesman. Peter couldn’t understand why Jesus would ask this question. How could anyone possibly identify a single touch while pushing his way through a crowd of people?

Peter failed to understand that Jesus was speaking of a special kind of touch—a touch which tapped into Jesus’ unlimited source of power.

Jairus. This anxious father is not mentioned in this account, but his presence can be sensed. He had urged Jesus to come to his home because his only daughter was dying. It must have been hard enough for Jairus as the multitudes that thronged Jesus slowed their progress. But when Jesus actually stopped—to listen closely to this woman’s story and then to encourage her—Jairus must have been frantic. Didn’t Jesus realize that his mission was *urgent*? How could the Lord dawdle when Jairus’s little girl was dying?

And then as soon as Jesus finished speaking with the woman, word arrived that the daughter had died. We can only imagine the father’s emotions, but from Jesus’ words to him, fear seemed to predominate ([Luke 8:50](#)).

How the story unfolds. As Jesus followed Jairus to his home, a woman who had suffered from a continual menstrual flow for a dozen years came up behind him. Convinced that she would be made whole if only she could touch Jesus, she reached out and made contact with the hem of his garment. And her flow of blood miraculously stopped!

Jesus stopped too and asked who had touched him. The disciples did not realize that Jesus was speaking of a special touch. They expressed surprise that Jesus should ask such a question.

Finally the woman came forward, trembling. She fell down in the position of a supplicant and told her story, relating that she was healed the moment she touched Jesus. Christ not only showed no anger over being touched by a woman who was *niddah*, but explained, “Your faith has made you well.” Then he dismissed her with a blessing, “Go in peace” ([Luke 8:48](#)).

“Somebody touched Me” ([Luke 8:46](#)). What was so special about the touch of the woman?

It was intentional. The woman did not simply brush against Jesus accidentally. She intended to touch him.

It was purposeful. The woman was intent on being healed from the flow of blood that had made her an outcast for so many years.

It was faith-driven. The woman believed that Jesus had power in himself to heal her. It was this faith that drove her to find Jesus and to touch him.

It was efficacious. When the woman touched Jesus, she was healed immediately, and she felt the difference. She did not have to wait to see if the bleeding had really stopped. She knew immediately.

“Your faith has made you well” ([Luke 8:48](#)). The Greek word translated “made you well” is *sesoken*, from *sozo*, “to save.” The primary focus is on deliverance from her medical condition. But in view of the implications of this woman’s conditions in rabbinic Judaism, a broader meaning is implied.

- *The flow of blood* drained her physically.
- *The flow of blood* made her socially unclean and isolated her from others in the community.
- *The flow of blood* made her religiously unclean, and cut her off from worship at the temple.

Jesus’ touch, however, *saved her physically* by restoring her health; *saved her socially* by restoring her fellowship with others in the community; and *saved her spiritually* by enabling her to join again those who worshipped God at the temple and on Israel’s religious holidays.

What a picture this is of our salvation. When we approach Jesus with this woman’s kind of faith, he saves us physically (a promise to be fulfilled completely in our resurrection). He saves us socially, as the Holy Spirit bonds us to others in the body of Christ to form a new and loving community. He saves us spiritually, forgiving us and making us children of God with access to the Father.

The tense of the Greek verb translated as “healed” in verse [48](#) emphasizes that the woman’s healing had taken place, and that her deliverance would continue to affect her life. It is the same for us. We are saved once for all when we trust Jesus as Savior. And the saving impact of Jesus in our lives will continue to affect us for time and eternity.



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“Your faith has made you well” ([Luke 8:48](#)). When the woman had told her story to Jesus, Jesus announced it was her faith that had made her well.

This statement is significant, for it is another clear expression of the gospel principle of grace. The woman was healed not because of any merit of hers, but because she exercised faith in Jesus. In the same way, people today can reach out to touch Jesus. How? Our approach to Jesus must be:

- *Intentional.* We consciously choose to come to Jesus Christ.
- *Purposeful.* We come to Jesus with the awareness that we are spiritually sick and need healing.
- *Faith-driven.* We come to Jesus because we believe that he and he alone can save.
- *Efficacious.* We sense within ourselves the Holy Spirit’s testimony that we have been truly saved and made well.

“Go in peace” ([Luke 8:48](#)). The blessing with which Jesus dismissed the woman is also ours to claim. Christ had met her need on every level, bringing peace. When we come to Jesus with this woman’s kind of faith, he meets our every need, and we also find peace.

JESUS RAISES JAIRUS’S DAUGHTER [Luke 8:41–56](#); [Matthew 9:18–26](#); [Mark 5:22–43](#)

Jesus responded to the pleas of Jairus to help his daughter. The girl died while Jesus was on the way to her home, but Christ restored her to life.

Background of the miracle. The man who came to Jesus for help, Jairus, is identified in [Luke 8:41](#) as a “ruler of the synagogue” (*archon tes synagoges*). This was an important position in Judaism. Three men represented the synagogue in local government. The president of this group of three was the “ruler of the synagogue.” He was also considered an archon of the local community (“rulers” in [Matt. 9:18](#)).

The head of the synagogue was not necessarily a rabbi, but he was an educated man who could evaluate the competence of those invited to read the Scriptures and address the people. He also ran the financial affairs of the synagogue and was responsible for ensuring correct behavior at worship. *This position* was unpaid, and it was held by those who were greatly respected in the community. Such a person was aided by a paid assistant who took care of the many practical details of maintaining the synagogue and its services (the “attendant” of [Luke 4:20](#)).

We know then that Jairus was an important man who held a respected religious and governmental post. It is significant that at least some persons of high standing—as well as the disadvantaged and the oppressed—had a real faith in Jesus.

Parties to the miracle. The central figures are Jesus, Jairus, and Jairus’s daughter. We are also given glimpses of some people gathered at Jairus’s home.

Jesus. Jesus was responsive to the synagogue president’s request to come and heal his dying daughter. But on the way, Christ stopped to deal with a woman who had an unstoppable menstrual flow (see page 201). Given the urgency of Jairus’s request, it may seem strange that Jesus paused for so long. His delay is explained when he went to the home and brought the girl, who had died, back to life. By waiting for the worst to happen, Jesus brought even greater joy to Jairus and offered proof of his power.

Jairus. Although he was an important man, he did not hesitate to hurry to Jesus to plead for help for his dying daughter. Jairus clearly was a man with faith in Jesus, for he believed that if Jesus would come and lay hands on his little girl, she would live.

We can only guess at Jairus’s agony when Jesus delayed to speak with the woman whose flow of blood had been healed. Likewise, we can only imagine his joy when Jesus later delivered his daughter to him, alive and restored.

Jairus’s daughter. Luke noted that the girl was twelve years old. This was just before the marriageable age of 13. Her death just before the experience of becoming a wife and mother adds to the sense of tragedy that Luke conveys.

The people gathered at Jairus’s house. These are described as “those who wept and wailed loudly” ([Mark 5:40](#)). The implication is that they were professional mourners—women hired to accompany a funeral procession and loudly bewail the loss. When Jesus announced that the little girl inside was not dead but sleeping, those making the



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commotion ridiculed him. Their attitude may reflect their preference for a day's pay over the life of the young girl. Selfish self-interest is sometimes stronger than concern for the suffering.

How the story unfolds. Jesus responded to the urgent request of Jairus to go with him to save his young daughter's life. As they pushed through the crowds, a desperate woman touched Jesus and was cured of a chronic flow of blood that had ruined her life. Jesus then stopped and talked with her!

By the time Christ was ready to move on, messengers reported the child's death. But Jesus told Jairus not to fear but "only believe, and she will be made well."

When they arrived, they discovered that professional mourners had already filled Jairus's house and were making a great commotion. Jesus was ridiculed when he told them the girl was not dead but "sleeping." Jesus then removed the mourners, went into a room with the body of the girl, and called her back to life. The parents were amazed when he opened the door and told them to get her something to eat.

"He fell down at Jesus' feet and begged Him" (Luke 8:41). No matter how important we may be, there are times when our need is so desperate that there is no room for pride. It was this kind of situation which Jairus faced that day. How wonderful that we can go to Jesus with our needs, as Jairus did.

"Your daughter is dead. Do not trouble the teacher" (8:49). The messengers who came from Jairus's house were wrong on two counts.

They assumed that death limited Jesus' power. Soon they would see Jairus's daughter alive and well again. Even death submits to the word of Jesus Christ.

They assumed that Jesus would not want to be bothered with Jairus's suffering. Even when God does not intervene to help, Christ does care for us and feels with us in our pain.

"Only believe, and she will be made well" (8:50). It would be easy to misunderstand this sentence. Jesus did not say, "Only believe *in order that* she may be made well." Jairus's belief was not a condition of the girl's healing. Jesus said, "Only believe *and* she will be made well."

Belief in Jesus would calm the father's fears and give him hope until Jesus actually made her well. Then the father would not need faith; he would possess what faith had led him to expect.

It was Jesus, and not Jairus's faith, that performed the miracle. Jesus' ability to exercise his power doesn't depend on human faith. Faith in Jesus will carry *us* through our dark times, until God acts to meet our needs. Then faith's expectation will be rewarded with the thing for which we had hoped.

"She is not dead, but sleeping" (8:52). This seems a strange saying, because the girl *was* dead. But the key to understanding these words is to realize what they and he meant by "dead."

To the parents and the mourners, "dead" meant gone—cut off from the realm of the living, forever lost to loved ones. To Jesus, biological death was as temporary as that peaceful unconsciousness into which we slip each night. Jesus knew there will be an awakening for the dead, just as there is an awakening each morning for the sleeping. Paul captured the glory of this truth in [1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14](#), where he encouraged believers not to

sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus.

Our dead sleep now. But when Jesus returns, there will be a grand awakening!

The meaning of the miracle. This miracle reminds us that Jesus controls both death and life. As with Jairus's daughter, the death of our loved ones brings grief and fear. Yet this miracle account reminds us that while we wait for the great reunion that will come when the dead in Christ are raised, we wait in faith. We will be "made well" in that glorious time.

JESUS HEALS TWO BLIND MEN [Matthew 9:27–31](#)

Jesus healed two blind men who cried out to Him as "Son of David."

Background of the miracle. Blindness has been common in the Middle East since before biblical times. Yet the Old Testament records no such miracle of restoring sight as Jesus performed (see [Matt. 4:23; 8:16–17; 9:35](#)). Each of the



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Gospels reports several incidents of him restoring sight to the blind. Why such an emphasis on these events and on other healing miracles?

[Isaiah 35:5, 6](#) associated such healings with the messianic age. Isaiah predicted for Israel that when God “comes to save you,”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
Then the lame shall leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the dumb sing.

The miracles that Jesus performed fulfilled this prophecy. They should have been recognized by the Jewish people and their teachers as proof of who Jesus was. We learn in this miracle story, however, that the first people to clearly see the significance of what Jesus did were two blind men!

Parties to the miracle. The miracle account, told in just three verses and recorded only in Matthew, mentions only Jesus and the two blind men.

Jesus. Jesus is given two titles in these verses: Son of David and Lord. Both are significant for understanding the implications of the event.

The two blind men. They are the first persons in Matthew’s Gospel to address Jesus as “Son of David.” This was a Messianic title, for the promised deliverer was to be a descendant of David and thus one qualified to inherit Israel’s throne.

How the story unfolds. Just after Jesus left Jairus’s house (see p. 203), he heard two blind men calling to him as “Son of David,” asking for mercy. Jesus took the blind men inside the house [where he was staying?] and questioned them about their faith. Each professed faith in him, addressing him as Lord. Christ then touched their eyes and restored their sight.

Although Jesus “sternly warned them” not to tell anyone, they “spread the news about him in all that country.”

“Do you believe that I am able?” ([Matthew 9:28](#)). Why the emphasis on faith in this miracle account? There are several reasons.

Faith, not desperation. When people are desperate, they often cry out to God without any conviction that he can help—or even that he exists. Jesus’ questioning revealed that the blind men came to him not out of desperation but in faith.

Focused, not general. Christ asked in pointed fashion, “Do you believe *that I am able to do this?*” The power of God is made available to us in Jesus. Our faith is not to be in some abstract being “out there,” but in the person of Jesus Christ, God the Son incarnate, our Savior. Jesus’ questioning revealed that the blind men truly trusted him and his ability to save.

Effective, not futile. Some interpreters make a serious error with these words. They assume that when Jesus said “according to your faith,” he meant that if they had *enough* faith their sight would be restored. Not at all. The healing was according to the object of their faith. They were healed because their trust was in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus still opens the channel through which God’s love and power will flow.

“Son of David... Lord” ([Matthew 9:27, 28](#)). Christ’s questioning of the two blind men established that their faith was truly in him. It also established that they understood who he was. Their cry “Son of David” is the first public acknowledgment recorded in Matthew that Jesus was the promised Messiah. During their questioning by Jesus, they also acknowledged Jesus as Lord.

The word *Lord* in the first century was sometimes used in addressing a superior as a sign of respect. But its use in this context is far more significant. Jesus was not only Israel’s Messiah; he is history’s sovereign Lord.

To have real faith in Jesus, we must recognize and acknowledge him for who he truly is.



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Jesus “warned them sternly” ([Matthew 9:30](#)). The Greek word used here is *embrimaomai*, which occurs only five times in the New Testament ([Mark 1:43](#); [14:55](#); [John 11:33](#), [38](#)). Always it is connected with deep emotion. Why the emotion here, and why the stern warning?

When this miracle took place, Jesus had been teaching and working miracles in Judea and Galilee for some time. Now, at last, the message of his miracles to Israel had been recognized by the two blind men. No wonder Jesus felt strong emotion at that moment. And no wonder Jesus questioned them so closely about their faith. Had they *really* understood? They had!

But Jesus knew that the rest of the people would *not* understand. Neither would they respond with a faith like that of these two men. It was best that this miracle, so briefly stated but so meaningful to Jesus, not be reported to the doubting crowds.

But the blind men, excited by their healing, couldn’t keep quiet. They spread the news everywhere. They couldn’t sense what the miracle healing had meant to Jesus. They only knew what it had meant to them.

How important it is to realize that the miracles God performs may be as significant a blessing to him as they are to us.

JESUS CASTS OUT A MUTE SPIRIT [Matthew 9:32–35](#)

Jesus cast out an evil spirit that had blocked a man’s ability to speak.

Background of the miracle. Matthew indicates this miracle took place as two blind men whose sight had been restored (see page 205) were leaving Jesus’ house ([Matt. 9:32](#)). The two miracles are linked also by Matthew’s intent to contrast the responses to Jesus by the blind men, the crowds, and the Pharisees. The two miracle accounts should thus be examined and taught together.

Parties to the miracle. The three brief verses that contain this account focus our attention on the interaction of Jesus, the mute man, the multitudes, and the Pharisees.

Jesus. Jesus had just been recognized by two blind men as Israel’s Messiah and sovereign Lord. His miracles, performed in fulfillment of prophecy, offered proof of his identity (see “*Background of the miracle*,” above).

The mute man. The Greek word used of his disability is *kophos*, which generally has the meaning of “deaf mute.” The text makes it clear that the cause of his malady was not organic, but oppression by an evil spirit.

The multitudes. Matthew emphasizes the astonishment of the crowds which witnessed this miracle and their awareness that “it was never seen like this in Israel” ([9:33](#)). No Old Testament prophet worked miracles like those which Jesus was performing.

The Pharisees. These influential men had a reputation for piety because of their strict observance of Mosaic Law. They had decided that Jesus’ power must come from Satan, not God.

How the story unfolds. As the blind men whose sight Jesus had restored left, a mute man was brought to Jesus. Jesus cast out the evil spirit who had blocked the man’s powers of speech, and the mute began to speak. The crowd was amazed, because in all of sacred history nothing like Jesus’ miracles had been witnessed. The Pharisees, confirmed in their hostility toward Jesus, muttered and accused him of being part of a satanic conspiracy.

Three responses to the two miracles. This miracle must be examined with the healing of the two blind men which immediately preceded it. Matthew’s point in linking the two was to demonstrate the differing responses to those who observed Jesus’ performing miracles.

The two blind men. The two blind men realized that Jesus’ miracles marked him as the Messiah, and they put their trust in him ([Matt. 9:27](#), [28](#)).

The crowd. The crowd acknowledged that “it was never seen like this in Israel.” No healings such as these had been performed by Israel’s prophets. But the phrase “seen like this” is significant. While such miracles had never been *seen*, they had been *predicted by Isaiah* (see p. 205)! And that prediction associated the miracles Jesus performed with the coming of the Messiah. In fact, the first two miracles mentioned in [Isaiah 35:5](#) are:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.



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If we understand *kophos* to mean “deaf mute,” these are the very miracles Matthew recorded in this passage!

The crowds, like the two blind men, had all the proof they needed that Jesus was the Messiah! But unlike the blind men, they simply could not “see.”

The Pharisees. The judgment of the Pharisees is harsher and more revealing. These men who took such pride in their knowledge of the Law should have noticed immediately the relationship between the miracles Jesus performed and the messianic promises. Unlike the crowds, they were *willfully* blind. In ascribing Christ’s miracles to Satan, they rejected the testimony of the Scriptures which they claimed to honor.

No wonder John reported Christ saying at another time, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” ([John 5:39](#), [40](#)).

The meaning of the miracles. These miracles have a unique function. Note that these two miracles are found only in Matthew’s Gospel and that his Gospel was directed primarily to a Jewish audience.

In selecting these two miracles and focusing attention on the response of various groups to Jesus, Matthew presents a strong argument for Jesus’ Messiahship. These miracles are linked in prophecy with the messianic age to be instituted by God.

But do people respond when Jesus offers his miracles as proof of his messiahship? A few recognized him and respond with faith (the two blind men). Most were confused and unable to grasp the meaning of what they had witnessed (the crowds). And the religious leaders, who knew most about the Scriptures and should have understood the significance of Jesus’ wonders, were simply “not willing” to submit to him. They not only rejected him; they turned others against him by charging that he was part of a satanic conspiracy.

Jesus presents himself today as the wonder-working Savior, and we must also decide for or against placing faith in him.

JESUS FEEDS 5,000 PEOPLE [John 6:1–14](#); [Matthew 14:13–21](#); [Mark 6:30–44](#); [Luke 9:10–17](#)

Jesus fed a large crowd which followed him into the wilderness, using only a few small loaves and fishes.

Background to the miracle. It was the responsibility of the head of each Jewish family at mealtime to look up to heaven while thanking God, and then to break and distribute bread for the meal. One of the most common of such mealtime prayers was, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

In performing this miracle, Jesus assumed the role of head of the family as well as the role of God, bringing forth bread to meet the needs of his people.

The Gospel writers followed Jewish custom in counting only the men when reckoning the crowd. While the ideal woman of rabbinic lore stayed at home, it is clear from the Gospels and from various references in early rabbinic literature that women went to the market and worked in the fields with their husbands at harvest time. Some have estimated that the crowd Jesus fed, if the women and children were added, might have been fifteen or twenty thousand.

This is an especially significant miracle, for it is reported in all four of the Gospels.

Parties to the miracle. The significant figures in this miracle account are Jesus, the disciples, the thousands who had followed Jesus into a wilderness area, and a boy who shared his lunch.

Jesus. Jesus’ revealed his deity by creating bread, as if in answer to the usual mealtime prayer.

Jesus’ disciples. The disciples showed sensitivity to the needs of the crowd for food and shelter ([Matt. 14:15](#)). But their solution, to “send them away, so they can buy bread,” was not acceptable to Jesus. The disciples were stunned when Jesus ordered, “You give them something to eat” ([Mark 6:37](#)).

The crowds. Great crowds had followed Jesus into a “deserted” (uninhabited) area. They had come hastily, without bringing food to eat on the way. Jesus saw them as sheep, wandering aimlessly, helpless without a shepherd.

The boy. The boy who provided the food Jesus multiplied is mentioned only by John ([6:9](#)). How strange that in many Sunday school lessons, he is made the focus of this story rather than Jesus.



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How the story unfolds. Jesus had been surrounded and harried by crowds of people coming and going. He told his disciples it was time to rest, so they set out by boat to find a deserted place.

But other people recognized him as the boat passed. By the time the boat landed, a new multitude had gathered to greet him. Jesus couldn't escape, even for a moment. Rather than being irritated, Jesus was deeply moved; these ordinary people to him were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them.

When evening drew near, the disciples reminded Jesus that it was late, and they were in an uninhabited area. Jesus needed to send the people away soon, so they could "buy themselves bread." Jesus shocked the disciples by his reply: "You give them something to eat" ([Mark 6:37](#)).

Confused, the disciples objected. It would take at least eight month's wages to buy enough bread for such a crowd, even if that much bread were available. Jesus asked, "How many loaves do you have?"

The disciples reported they could come up with five loaves (each about the size of a modern dinner roll) and two small fish. Jesus told the disciples to have the crowd sit down in groups, as they would at mealtime. Christ then blessed the bread [i.e., said the prayer used before eating] and began to break the bread and fish into smaller pieces. The food was miraculously multiplied. After everyone had eaten, twelve flat wicker baskets of food were left over.

Jesus then sent the crowds away. While he went up into the mountains to pray, the disciples set out by boat to cross the sea.

Sheep not having a shepherd ([Mark 6:34](#)). Jesus' imagery has deep Old Testament roots. Moses prayed that God would provide a successor who "may lead them [Israel] out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd" ([Num. 27:17](#)). God's answer in that situation was to set apart Joshua—which is the Hebrew version of the name "Jesus."

Even more significant is the use of the image in [Ezekiel 34](#). In that passage, the prophet condemned the false shepherds who mistreated God's flock and who led them astray. God promised,

"Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them.... I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord God. "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick" ([Ezek. 34:11-12, 15-16](#)).

What happened that day by the Sea of Galilee identified Jesus with the Lord God of the Old Testament, whose concern was for the well-being of the flock. In Christ, God was seeking out and feeding Israel not only with bread but with truth as well.

"You give them something to eat" ([Mark 6:37](#)). Jesus didn't expect the disciples to perform a miracle. But the command, with its emphatic "you" in the Greek, is significant.

Jesus challenged the disciple's solution. The disciples had been concerned for the crowd. But their solution was to send them away so they could "buy themselves bread" ([Mark 6:36](#)). But Jesus did not come to send people away. He came to draw them to him. He came because the people could not "buy themselves" what they required to meet their deepest need. Only Jesus could meet that need, and he did so supremely on Calvary.

Jesus challenged the disciple's vision. Jesus was training his disciples so they would be able to meet the needs of the shepherdless. "You give them" was a challenge to help them catch a vision of the mission for which they were being prepared.

Jesus challenged the disciple's understanding. The answer to their confusion on how to fulfill Jesus' command was not to buy bread but to look to Jesus. Christ never asks us to do anything without providing the needed resources to complete the task.

The miracle that followed illustrates this principle. Jesus took what the disciples had and multiplied it. No matter how limited our resources, God's ability to multiply them is as unlimited as they were on that day in the wilderness.

Twelve baskets of fragments ([Mark 6:43](#)). The Gospel writers report that everyone in the crowd ate and were filled, after which they took up 12 baskets of fragments. Some have seen significance in the number 12. There were 12 tribes of Israel. Messiah's provision was so generous that even his scraps can supply the needs of Israel, as represented by the 12 surplus baskets.



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“Take him by force to make him king” (John 6:15). John adds a detail not mentioned in the other Gospels. After the meal, the enthusiastic crowd decided that Jesus must be the prophet promised by Moses ([Deut. 18:18](#)). Why not then acclaim Jesus king?

Jesus later commented on their motive. “You seek me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled” ([John 6:26](#)). The people had not seen the meaning of the miraculous sign which identified Jesus as the Lord God, their Shepherd. All they knew was that he was someone who could feed them. Self-interest, not faith, lay at the root of their enthusiasm. No wonder they were ready to proclaim Jesus king.

How ironic are the phrases “take him by force” and “make him” king. Those who acclaim a person king will be willing to submit to his will. The crowd intended to make Jesus submit to their will, thus robbing him of his royal authority. Let’s be careful not to do the same. When we come to God in Jesus’ name, may our prayers be for that which is in his will. As true followers of Christ, we should not attempt to cajole him into doing our will.

Miracle and message (John 6:26–66). John’s Gospel follows a pattern noted before (p. 186). He describes a miracle, then records a lengthy teaching of Jesus which is related to it. That lengthy teaching in [John 6](#) has been called Jesus’ “Sermon on the Bread of Life.”

In this sermon, Jesus pointed out the selfish motives of the crowds who followed him. But Christ himself is the true bread, the source and sustainer of life. He is the true bread of heaven, who has been sent by the Father to give eternal life to everyone who believes in him. The ancestors of his hearers who had eaten manna in the wilderness were all dead, but those who would appropriate Christ—figuratively eating his flesh and drinking his blood—would live forever.

John notes that after this sermon “many of his disciples [used here in the sense of loose adherents] went back and walked with him no more” ([John 6:66](#)). They had eagerly received the bread that sustained physical life, but they rejected the Word that promised eternal life.

Some people today preach a false gospel, which promises material prosperity to those with enough faith. How eagerly the crowds in Jesus’ day would have welcomed such a gospel. And how quickly we turn away from the true gospel as well. The authentic gospel promises us new life, but then it calls us to live this new life not for ourselves but for the Lord.

The meaning of the miracle. Commentators tend to follow many side trails in discussing the feeding of the 5,000, but we must not forget this miracle’s central message. In each Gospel, this miracle is an acted-out parable. Jesus declared himself to be the Lord God, come to shepherd his people, as he had promised through the prophet Ezekiel.

JESUS WALKS ON WATER [Matthew 14:22–33](#); [Mark 6:45–52](#); [John 6:15–21](#)

Jesus walked on a stormy sea and joined his disciples in their small boat.

Background of the miracle. After Jesus fed the 5,000, he “made” his disciples get in their boat and go on ahead of him ([Matt. 14:22](#)). The strong Greek verb in this passage is often translated “compelled.”

What was the urgency?

- Jesus may have sent the disciples ahead to help diffuse the crowd that wanted to make him king (compare [John 6:15](#)).
- Jesus wanted to escape both the crowd and the disciples, to get some rest ([Mark 6:31–32](#)).
- Jesus definitely wanted to spend some time alone with his Father in prayer ([Matt. 14:23](#)).

The separation of Jesus from his disciples provided the occasion for this miracle.

When the disciples first saw Jesus approaching them on the lake, they mistook him for a ghost. Their fear reflected the common first-century belief that ghosts were hostile beings, the shades of malevolent men who had died, and who would harm human beings.

Parties to the miracle. Jesus is the central figure. The others involved are the twelve disciples, with the emphasis on Peter.

Jesus. After resting and praying Jesus was walking on the surface of the Sea of Galilee, apparently crossing it to join the disciples who had gone on ahead by boat. The miracle displayed Christ’s control of the forces of nature.



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The disciples. The disciples' initial reaction of fear was transformed to worship as the miracle impressed them with the fresh realization that Jesus was "the Son of God" ([Matt. 14:33](#)).

Peter. Peter is both a good example and a bad example in this miracle account. He alone had faith enough in Jesus to step out of the boat into the stormy sea. But once on the waters, his gaze was torn from Jesus and fixed on his surroundings. We are also asked to risk in response to Jesus' call. Peter's experience reminds us not to take our eyes off Jesus in difficult situations.

How the story unfolds. Jesus hurried his disciples into a boat and away from the crowds. It is likely that he told them to wait for him until a fixed time and if he had not arrived by then, they should set out to cross the lake. But the sea was stormy and the wind was in their face. By four o'clock in the morning, the disciples were only halfway across the lake.

When they noticed a figure walking on the water, the disciples were terrified, assuming it must be a ghost. But Jesus called out and identified himself. Peter then asked the Lord to tell him to join him on the waters. Jesus did, and Peter stepped out into the stormy waters. He walked a few steps toward Jesus but was distracted by the raging winds and began to sink.

Jesus caught Peter's hand and lifted him up, calling him a "little-faith" person and asking, "Why did you doubt?" ([Matt. 14:31](#)). When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the winds and the sea calmed down.

Amazed, the disciples worshiped Jesus. For the first time in Matthew's Gospel, they expressed the belief that Jesus was "the Son of God" ([Matt. 14:33](#); see also [Matt. 16:16](#); [26:63](#); [27:40](#), [43](#), [54](#)).

"The fourth watch of the night" ([Matt. 14:25](#)). The Romans divided the night into four watches, the Hebrews into three. The Roman system was adopted by all the Gospel writers. Thus, Jesus approached the boat between 3:00 A.M. and 6:00 A.M.

"It is I" ([14:27](#)). The Greek phrase is *ego eimi*, and it may reflect the Old Testament name *Yahweh*, meaning "I AM." No wonder Jesus could encourage his disciples to "take courage" [rendered "be of good cheer" in our text], and "do not be afraid." Since God was with them, they had no reason to fear.

"Command me to come to You" ([14:28](#)). The incident with Peter offers an interesting commentary on Jesus' words of encouragement.

"Lord, if it is You" ([14:28](#)). The conditional here has the meaning, "Since it is You." Jesus had announced, *ego eimi* ("it is I"). Peter had confidence that Jesus truly was Lord.

"When Peter had come down out of the boat" ([14:29](#)). Jesus said, "Take courage." Peter showed his courage by stepping out boldly into the surging waters.

"He was afraid, and beginning to sink" ([14:30](#)). Jesus had said, "Do not be afraid." Out on the waves alone, Peter did fear. And he began to sink. Fear may overcome us also when we take our eyes off Jesus and concentrate on our circumstances.

"O you of little faith" ([14:31](#)). It is far better to be a "little faith" person than a "no faith" person. But best of all is to be a person of "great faith."

"Why did you doubt" ([14:31](#))? At first, the answer seems obvious. Peter doubted because the circumstances were fraught with danger. But the question encouraged Peter and the disciples to look deeper. Jesus had announced "It is I." No matter how hazardous the circumstances may be, there was no reason to doubt when Jesus was present.

This is one of the most important messages of this miracle for us today. We can become so obsessed with difficulties and dangers that our doubts overwhelm us. Yet if Jesus, the Son of God, is with us, he is in control of every circumstance. We need to be as bold as Peter in walking through our stormy waters, yet wiser than Peter by never forgetting Jesus' presence in our lives.

"They had not understood" ([Mark 6:52](#)). Mark's account of this miracle displays a slightly different emphasis than Matthew's. Mark draws our attention to the disciples' hardened hearts. The phrase indicates an underlying attitude which accounts for their amazement at Jesus' ability to walk on water and at the immediate calming of the waters when Jesus entered the boat. They had just seen Jesus feed 5,000 people. They should have recognized his claim to be the Lord, come to offer himself as Shepherd to his people (see p. 208f.).



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While this emphasis is different from Matthew's, the two accounts are actually in complete harmony. The private miracle performed on the Sea of Galilee taught the disciples what the feeding of the 5,000 had not—that “truly, You are the Son of God” ([Matt. 14:33](#)).

The meaning of the miracle. With this miracle, we have evidence that the true identity of Jesus was beginning to dawn on his disciples. They would grasp the full meaning of that confession—“You are the Son of God” ([Matt. 14:33](#))—only later, after the Cross and the Resurrection.

Looking back from that perspective today, we can see in this miracle more evidence that Jesus was who he claimed to be. We can see something of what it means to live in relationship with the Son of God.

The life of faith calls for a boldness like Peter's. He was willing to risk leaving the security of the boat to walk alone on the stormy lake. Faith also calls for a continual awareness that Jesus is with us. This will dispel our doubts, no matter how difficult our circumstances may be.

CHAPTER 11



JESUS: MIRACLES OF THE SON OF GOD

ASSURANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

Matthew—John

- [MIRACLE FOR A GENTILE \(MATTHEW 15:21-28\)](#)
- [DUPLICATE MIRACLE? \(MATTHEW 15:30-38\)](#)
- [PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGHT \(JOHN 9\)](#)
- [“LAZARUS, COME FORTH!” \(JOHN 11\)](#)
- [WHY CURSE A FIG TREE? \(MARK 11:12-14, 20-24\)](#)
- [MIRACLES AT CALVARY](#)
- [MIRACLES SURROUNDING THE RESURRECTION](#)

Miracles accompanied Jesus throughout His public ministry. Even as Jesus hung on Calvary's cross, wonders took place around Him.

The miracles of Jesus mark Christ as God's messenger. And Jesus' own words mark Him as the Son of God. As we read the accounts of the wonders this Man performed we are confronted with evidence that supports His claims about Himself.

But all Jesus' miracles, as wonderful as they were, pale before the grand miracle of the Resurrection (see pages [15–17]). In the words of the apostle Paul, by His resurrection from the dead Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God” ([Romans 1:4](#)).

JESUS HEALS A SYRO-PHOENICIAN GIRL [Matthew 15:21–28](#); [Mark 7:24–30](#)

Jesus first ignored and then responded to the plea of a Gentile woman who begged him to cast a demon from her daughter.

Background of the miracle. This miracle took place in the region once controlled by the cities of Tyre and Sidon, which lay on the Mediterranean coast about thirty and fifty miles, respectively, from Galilee. While Jesus often “withdrew” from the crowds to rest ([Matt. 4:12](#); [12:15](#); [14:13](#)) this is his only recorded retreat to Gentile territory. His search for solitude was thwarted, however, as “he could not be hidden” ([Mark 7:24](#)). He was apparently recognized by some people who had come from this region earlier to hear him ([Mark 3:8](#); [Luke 6:17](#)).

The woman from this region who appealed to Jesus was called a “Greek” by Mark. He used the term as a synonym for “non-Jew.” Matthew identified her as a Canaanite, one of the ancient pagan peoples who were Israel's traditional enemies. While the Bible reports healings by Jesus of non-Jews in Jewish territory, this is the only miracle he performed for a pagan in Gentile lands.



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Parties to the miracle. The persons in this miracle story are Jesus, the Canaanite woman, and the disciples.

Jesus. Jesus left Jewish territory to escape the crowds so he could rest. But even here, he was recognized. The most striking feature of this account is Jesus' apparent coldness to and initial rejection of a desperate woman. It seems so out of character for Christ, normally so compassionate, to fail to respond to anyone who requested his help. Especially troubling to some interpreters is Jesus' comparison of the Jews to "children" and Gentiles to "dogs."

The Canaanite woman. Following Jesus in spite of his apparent indifference, the woman begged him to help her "severely demon-possessed" daughter ([Matt. 15:22](#)). When Jesus finally spoke to her, her reply showed her wisdom and faith.

The disciples. The disciples were puzzled observers. They were irritated when the woman trailed after them, constantly crying out for Jesus' help. They suggested that Jesus help her in order to get rid of her. This shows they misunderstood the critical issues involved.

How the story unfolds. Jesus' attempt to get some rest was frustrated when he was recognized even in gentile territory. One persistent woman annoyed the disciples by following Jesus around, crying out loudly for help. When they urged Jesus to heal her and get rid of her, Christ explained that he was "not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" ([Matt. 15:24](#)).

The woman fell at his feet and begged him to help. Jesus refused, saying it wasn't good to throw the children's bread to dogs. The analogy was clear: the Jews were the children; she and other Gentiles were dogs! The woman agreed, but pointed out that dogs do eat the crumbs that fall from the table as the children eat. Christ commended her faith and indicated her request had been granted. At that moment, her daughter was healed.

"Son of David" ([Matthew 15:22](#)). This title is reserved for Israel's Messiah, the promised King from David's line. In using this title, the Canaanite woman acknowledged Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Later she worshiped him as "Lord" ([Matt. 15:25](#)), a term which emphasized Jesus' rule over humankind. Christ was "Son of David" for Israel; "Lord" for all mankind.

"Send her away, for she cries out after us" ([15:23](#)). Jesus' reply ([Matt. 15:23](#)) made it clear that the disciples were urging Jesus to send her away with her request granted. But note their motive. The disciples were moved by annoyance, not compassion.

"Not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" ([15:24](#)). Jesus at an earlier time had sent his disciples on a preaching mission with the warning, "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" ([Matt. 10:5, 6](#)). Christ was Israel's Messiah. His mission required him to concentrate his initial efforts on recalling straying Israel to relationship with God.

Mark, writing to the Gentiles, included a detail that Matthew left out. He quoted Jesus as saying to the woman, "Let the children be filled *first*" ([7:27](#)). God always intended that the gospel message have a universal impact. Yet it was only right that Jesus should first present himself to Israel as the fulfillment of the prophets' hopes and dreams.

"Throw it to the little dogs" ([15:26](#)). It is true that first-century Jews dismissed Gentiles as dogs. But Christ's analogy in this verse is not a condemnation of the Gentiles. He pictured a familiar household scene. When the family gathered for a meal, the parents didn't take food prepared for the children and put it on plates to feed puppies. Mom and dad may have a real affection for the puppies, but they don't give them the meal prepared for their children.

God had prepared the meal of miracles and wonders for Israel, the covenant family, who like lost sheep had strayed far from God. Miracles and wonders were not to be "thrown away" on Gentiles. Most of them would not be tuned in to spiritual matters.

"Crumbs" ([15:27](#)). The woman didn't argue or plead. In saying "Yes, Lord," she acknowledged the validity of Jesus' position. But she used Christ's own analogy. While it was true that the meal is prepared for the children, the puppies do get any crumbs that fall from the table. All she was asking for was one of those crumbs.

What a faith this Canaanite woman displayed. The miraculous healing she asked for would not be a problem for Jesus. She knew his power was so great that such a miracle would be a mere crumb from a table laden with goodness. And she was right.

"Great is your faith" ([15:28](#)). Jesus acknowledged and praised the faith in the woman's statement, then healed her daughter. While the woman had no right to a miracle healing—for these were intended as signs and witnesses to God's chosen people—her faith caused a crumb to fall into her life.



When Jesus Speaks: Through His Miracles - Intertestamental Period, Week 1

What a lesson for us. The healing we need—whether inner spiritual healing or physical restoration—is no great challenge for God. Our healing is only a crumb that falls from a table that groans under the weight of the wonders God has prepared. How can we fail to have faith in a God so great, whose miracle-working powers know no limits.

JESUS HEALS A DEAF AND DUMB MAN [Mark 7:31–37](#)

Jesus healed a man who was deaf and dumb.

Background of the miracle. Mark places this miracle immediately after the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter (see p. 214). In her case, Jesus had emphasized the fact that his miracles and wonders were intended especially for Israel. This miracle, performed along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, emphasizes this fact as well. It is just the kind of miracle which the prophets said would mark the ministry of the Messiah (see [Isa. 35:5](#)). The healing miracles of Jesus unmistakably marked him as the promised Saviour-King.

Parties to the miracle. The parties mentioned in this miracle account are Jesus, the deaf and dumb man, and an undefined "they."

Jesus. Jesus was back in Jewish territory, where he responded without hesitation to those who sought healing.

The afflicted man. We are told nothing about this disabled individual.

"They." Unnamed persons play a significant role in this miracle account. "They" brought the deaf and dumb man to Jesus. "They" were cautioned by Jesus to tell no one about the miracle. And "they" were astonished by what Jesus did.

How the story unfolds. Jesus left the Gentile region where he had healed a Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter. Back in familiar territory along the Sea of Galilee, he encountered a deaf and dumb man brought to him by some of the man's friends. He healed the man so he could both hear and speak. Jesus cautioned the witnesses to tell no one about the healing, but they spread the report everywhere. Everyone reacted with astonishment and approval.

"Departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, he came... to the Sea of Galilee" ([Mark 7:31](#)). The geographical reference connects this miracle with the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter. We need to read the account of the two miracles together and interpret the second in view of Jesus' remarks to the woman.

"They begged Him to put His hand on him" ([7:32](#)). This may simply be Mark's way of describing a request that Jesus heal the man. Or it may imply that they expected Jesus to heal *their way*. When we come to the Lord with our requests, we do well if we come without any expectation of the precise way in which Jesus will meet our needs.



"He took him aside from the multitude" ([7:33](#)). This is one of only two times that Jesus took someone aside for private healing (compare [Mark 8:23](#)). At the same time, it fits Mark's emphasis on Christ's desire to have closer personal contact with those whom he healed. The special touching of ears and tongue may have been a response to the "conditions" implied in the request of those who brought the victim that Christ might "put his hand on him."

Christ will often touch those who are weak in faith in ways that strengthen the faith they have.

"Ephphatha." It was not Jesus' touch that healed. The healing took place "immediately" when Jesus pronounced, "Be opened." He who created the universe with a spoken word ([Gen. 1:3](#), etc.) needed no more than a word to perform this miracle.

"They were astonished beyond measure" ([7:37](#)). Mark reports this as a delayed reaction from the crowd. Jesus had told the people crowded around to tell no one, but they proclaimed it "widely." Even after they had time to consider what had happened, they were overwhelmed. They understood *what* Jesus had done: "He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." Although they felt positively about Jesus ("he has done all things well."), they did not catch the significance of the miracle.

Yet a Gentile woman had recognized Christ as the Son of David, Israel's Messiah ([Matt 15:22](#)). She had even agreed when he explained that his miracles were "bread" provided for God's "lost sheep," Israel ([Matt. 15:27](#)). They were more than acts of kindness, in spite of the compassion that moved Jesus for those whom he healed. Jesus' miracles were signs which identified him to Israel as the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament prophets.



When Jesus Speaks: Through His Miracles - Intertestamental Period, Week 1

A pagan woman had understood the meaning of Jesus' miracles, but his own people—for whose instruction the miracles were intended—were astonished. All they could say was, “Good job!”

JESUS FEEDS FOUR THOUSAND PEOPLE [Matthew 15:30–38](#); [Mark 8:1–9](#)

Jesus miraculously provided food for another crowd, which had been with him for three days.

Background of the miracle. Some interpreters have assumed this account is not a separate miracle but a doublet—a repetition of the earlier story of the feeding of five thousand people ([Matt. 14:21](#); [Mark 6:44](#)). There are similarities between these accounts:

- Both happened in the country.
- Both featured bread and fish.
- Both portrayed Jesus giving thanks and breaking bread.
- Both portrayed the disciples distributing the food.
- Both ended in a boat trip.

At the same time, there are significant differences which indicate the two feedings were separate events.

- The numbers fed differ: five thousand and four thousand.
- The locales differ: northeast and southeast shores of the Sea of Galilee.
- The seasons differ: green grass is emphasized in the story of the five thousand.
- The initial amounts of food differ.
- The number of baskets of food left over differ.
- Different baskets are specified: in the story of the five thousand they are shallow woven trays; in the story of the four thousand the baskets are giant, hamper-sized containers.
- The length of time the people were with Jesus differs.

The two accounts not only report different events; they intentionally parallel the works of two of the Old Testament's premier prophets, each of whom miraculously fed God's people twice (Moses—[Ex. 16](#); [Num. 11](#); Elisha—[2 Kings 4:1–7](#), [38–44](#)).

See pages 208–211 for a discussion of parallel elements in the two miracle accounts.

Parties to the miracle. The miracle report featured Jesus, his disciples, and a hungry crowd.

Jesus. Jesus expressed his concern for the crowds that had been with him for some time. He took what little food the disciples could find and multiplied it to feed about four thousand men.

The disciples. Although they had witnessed the earlier feeding of five thousand people, the disciples again expressed confusion about how this crowd could be fed. Again they said “Where could we get enough bread” ([Matt. 15:33](#)). We often forget what Jesus has done for us before, never thinking of turning to him for help when faced by a new need.

The crowd. “Great multitudes” followed Jesus into the wilderness to receive and witness his healing miracles ([Matt. 15:30](#)). According to how the Jews reckoned time, the “three days” the crowd was without food doesn't imply they hadn't eaten for 72 hours. An evening, the following day, and the next morning—as little as 30 hours—would be considered “three days.”

The four thousand counted were the men only. If women and children are added, the crowd may have been as large as twelve thousand to fifteen thousand.

How the story unfolds. Jesus had been performing healing miracles for a great crowd. On the third day, Jesus expressed compassion and concern. If sent away without being fed, some people might “faint on the way” ([Matt. 15:32](#)). Jesus' disciples were frustrated. Where could they find enough food in such an isolated spot to feed such a great crowd?



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Jesus sent them to find out how much food was available. Then he seated the crowd, gave thanks for the bread and fish, and had the disciples distribute them to the crowd. After everyone had eaten, the disciples filled seven large baskets with leftover food.

“How many loaves do you have?” ([Matthew 15:34](#)). In each account, Jesus took the little food his disciples had and multiplied it to supply thousands. If we give Jesus what we have, however small, he will use it to supply the deeper needs of many.

“Seven large baskets full” ([15:37](#)). The “large baskets” in this account were *spuridas*, large woven baskets about the size of a large laundry hamper. The apostle Paul was let down over the walls of Damascus in this kind of basket ([Acts 9:25](#))!

These baskets were much larger than those used (*kophinoi*) after collecting leftovers following the feeding of the five thousand. What a reminder to the disciples, and to us, of the superabundance of Christ’s ability to satisfy our needs.

JESUS HEALS A BLIND MAN [Mark 8:22–26](#)

Jesus used an unusual method to heal a blind man.

Background of the miracle. Typically, Jesus’ healings took place instantaneously, and they were implemented by a verbal command from him. This incident is distinctive in that the restoration of a blind man’s sight was gradual, and the text doesn’t mention a spoken command. It is also unusual in that Christ touched the blind man not once, but twice.

We can understand the reason for Christ touching some people whom he healed. Jesus touched a leper he restored out of compassion: he knew how much this man, isolated as he was from others, needed to feel a human touch (p. 181). Jesus also touched a deaf and dumb man whom he made well, possibly to increase his faith (see page 216). But there is no suggestion in Mark’s account of the reason why Jesus took this man aside and twice touched his eyes to implement the healing.

Parties to the miracle. The text focuses on Jesus and the blind man, who was taken aside from the crowd for healing.

Jesus. Jesus responded to a request that he put his hands on a blind man (i.e., heal him).

The blind man. All we know about this blind man is that he had lost his sight as a youth or adult. When his sight began to return, he reported that “I see men like trees, walking” ([Mark 8:24](#)). He recognized the blurred, wavering images of trees, so he must have known what trees looked like before losing his sight.

How the story unfolds. In Bethsaida, a fishing village beside the Sea of Galilee, a blind man was brought to Jesus for healing. Christ took him aside, spat in his eyes, and laid hands on him. The man’s sight was only partially restored, and he told Jesus what he could make out. Jesus then “put His hands on his eyes again.” This time the man’s sight was fully restored. Then Jesus sent the man away with orders not to tell anyone what had happened.

“Put His hands on his eyes again” ([Mark 8:25](#)). Commentators have wondered why Jesus abandoned his usual method of instantaneous healing by command. Some have seen a symbolic meaning: the spiritual sight of his disciples also grew gradually.

A better suggestion was made by John Calvin: “He did so most probably for the purpose of proving, in the case of this man, that he had full liberty as to his method of proceeding, and was not restricted to a fixed rule.... And so the grace of Christ, which had formerly been poured out suddenly on others, flowed by drops, as it were, on this man.”

Calvin’s comment is helpful. We often yearn for instantaneous grace; yet God’s grace may be best measured out drop by drop, that we may savor it day by day. Both grace that is poured out and grace which is measured out drop by drop bring healing.



JESUS DELIVERS A DEMONIZED BOY [Mark 9:14–29](#); [Matthew 17:14–21](#); [Luke 9:37–43](#)

A desperate father brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus after Christ's disciples were unable to exorcise the demon.

Background of the miracle. Mark gives the most complete account of this miracle and of the conversation of Jesus with the father and his disciples. There is one significant difference among the three reports of the event.

Matthew identified the son's malady as epilepsy. Both Mark and Luke identified it as demon possession. This is not a contradiction. Matthew spoke of the symptoms, while Mark and Luke identified the underlying "disease." The symptoms as reported in Mark were clearly like those of epilepsy: Mark reported that whenever the demon seized the boy "it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid" ([9:18](#)).

In many ancient cultures, all diseases were assumed to be caused by evil spirits. In Egypt two medical traditions developed: one in which diseases were treated medically, and the other in which illnesses were treated by incantations and invocation of the gods. In later Egypt these traditions merged and the magical approach became dominant.

The New Testament writers distinguished between illnesses which had natural causes and maladies caused by demons. Many of the afflicted are spoken of as cripples, blind, or deaf while others—often with the same problems—are identified as afflicted by demons.

The activity of the demons portrayed in the New Testament makes it clear that these spiritual beings are *hostile* to humankind. When demons dominate an individual, they don't use their powers to bring that person health and happiness. Persons who seek contact with the demonic under the naïve assumption that they will gain some sort of power or privilege are deceived indeed.

Parties to the miracle. This miracle account reports on Jesus' lengthy interaction with the father and his disciples. It also contains significant information about the demon who tormented the son.

Jesus. Jesus was again shown to have power over Satan's hosts. We also sense Christ's frustration with the father as well as his disciples. In spite of all that Jesus had done to demonstrate who he was, none seemed to understand or to respond with appropriate faith.

The father. The father came looking for Jesus. When he arrived, Christ was on the Mount of Transfiguration with three of his disciples ([Mark 9:1–13](#)). Since Jesus was not around, the father looked up some of his disciples and asked them to perform the healing.

Jesus' remark about a "faithless generation" ([Mark 9:19](#)) was made immediately after the father told of the disciples' inability to help ([Mark 9:18](#)). The implication is that Jesus was frustrated by the father's failure to realize that he was the source of the healing power which marked him as the Messiah. We can never substitute reliance on "faith healers" for faith in Christ, even though the healers may claim to be Jesus' representatives. We should bring our needs to Jesus.

The disciples. After the miracle healing, the disciples asked Jesus why they couldn't cast out the demon. This was a relevant question, since [Matthew 10:1](#) reports that Jesus had earlier sent his disciples out to preach and had given them "power over unclean spirits." Yet the disciples were not able to help the son. Why? Jesus gave two reasons.

First, the disciples had "little faith" ([Matt. 17:20](#), see footnote). Jesus immediately went on to explain that he didn't mean a "little amount of faith." If faith were to be measured by its size, the tiniest amount [a "mustard seed"-sized faith] could move mountains ([Matt. 17:20](#)). No, faith's effectiveness depends on its *object*, not its amount.

The disciples had assumed *they* could cast out the demon. After all, hadn't they done it before when Jesus sent them out by two (cf. [Matt. 10:8](#))? The implication is that they had slipped into the error of relying on *their* authority rather than Jesus' authority in trying to cast out the demon.

Second, Jesus commented that "this kind [of demon] does not go out except by prayer and fasting" ([Matt. 17:21](#); [Mark 9:29](#)). This reflects the teaching of [Daniel 10](#) that Satan's angels, the demons of the Old and New Testament, are of different ranks and powers. The demon which had entered this man's son was no ordinary demon, but one of unusual rank. He had resisted every effort of the disciples to cast him out. "Prayer and fasting" represent the need for total dependence on the Lord's power.



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In spite of the strength of this particular demon, it also recognized and reacted to Jesus ([Mark 9:20](#)). When Jesus rebuked [commanded] the evil spirit, it convulsed the child—then left him ([Mark 9:28](#)). Even the strongest demons cannot resist Jesus or believers who command them in Jesus' name. (For more on demon possession and exorcism, see *Every Good and Evil Angel in the Bible*.)

The demon. Mark's Gospel gives us much information about the demon. It was of unusually high rank and power ([Mark 9:29](#)). It had taken possession of the son when he was a child ([Mark 9:21](#)). It showed its intense hostility toward human beings by throwing the boy into fire and water, as if intent on destroying its host ([Mark 9:22](#)). This account of demon possession, along with [Luke 8](#), provides vivid images of the evil intent of demons and clear descriptions of their major characteristics.

How the story unfolds. Jesus returned from the Mount of Transfiguration and found scribes and Pharisees debating a recent event with his disciples, while a crowd looked on. As Jesus approached, a man cried out, begging Jesus to look at his son. The son was demon-possessed, and the demon regularly threw the boy down, injuring him. The man told Jesus he had asked his disciples to heal the boy, but they couldn't.

Jesus expressed his frustration at this fresh evidence of unbelief, but he told the father to bring the son to him. When the demon saw Jesus, it threw the boy into a seizure. As the child writhed, Jesus asked how long this had been happening to him, learning he had been afflicted since childhood. The demon had often tried to kill his host!

"If you can do anything," the father pleaded, "have compassion on us and help us" ([Mark 9:22](#)).

Jesus told the father that all things are possible to the person who believes. The father, torn by hope and doubt, declared, "I believe, help my unbelief."

Jesus then rebuked the unclean spirit, commanding it to leave the child. The boy was racked with a last great convulsion, and then fell down as if dead. The demon was gone!

Later the disciples asked Jesus why they were unable to cast out the demon. Jesus replied that the reasons were complex. They lacked the necessary faith, and the demon was unusually powerful. After this, Jesus and his disciples moved on through Galilee.

"If You can do anything" (9:22). The father in this story stands in contrast with others who came to Jesus in the assurance that he could help. Even a Roman centurion had so much confidence in Jesus that he didn't even ask Jesus to visit his sick servant—only to speak the word. This father, however, came to Jesus not with confidence but with a last, desperate hope.

This demonstrates that whatever motivates a person to turn to Jesus, it is coming to Jesus that counts.

"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (9:24). The key word in this verse is "Lord." When our faith wavers, we are to reflect on who Jesus is, and remember that he is Lord.

"Lord" (9:24). This single word sums up the message of this miracle. Jesus is Lord. This truth was disputed by the religious leaders of Jesus' day. It was doubted by those who most needed his help. Even the disciples did not fully realize it. But Jesus demonstrated his authority by casting out the unusually powerful demon that had taken possession of the young victim. Jesus is Lord of all. Even a little faith, as long as it's centered on Jesus, can change our lives.

JESUS PRODUCES TAXES FROM A FISH'S MOUTH [Matthew 17:24-27](#)

Jesus told Peter to catch a fish and take the temple tax from its mouth.

Background of the miracle. [Exodus 30:13-16](#) specified that every Israelite male age 20 and older should pay a half-shekel into the temple treasury annually. This religious tax was used with other funds to support the temple ministry. The collection of this tax was the occasion for one of Jesus' most unusual miracles.

Parties to the miracle. The parties to the miracle were the collectors of the religious tax, Peter, and Jesus.

The tax collectors. The collectors of this tax were temple officials. Their behavior seems strange. Rather than asking for the tax, they asked Peter if Jesus paid it.

Peter. Peter hastily answered the tax collectors' question with a "Yes." Edersheim suggested that Peter sensed a trap in the officials' question, and said "Yes" in order to avoid the trouble that a different answer might have made for Jesus.



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Jesus. Jesus' gentle questioning of Peter made it clear that Peter had spoken before he thought. Jesus resolved the issue by providing the tax money in an unusual way.

How the story unfolds. Peter was questioned by collectors of the temple tax. Did Jesus intend to pay it? Peter answered "Yes." When Jesus next saw Peter he asked, "From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" Peter answered correctly, and Jesus summed up: "Then the sons are free."

Without explaining further, Jesus sent Peter to cast a line into the nearby waters. The fish Peter caught had in its mouth a coin that would pay both Peter's and Christ's annual temple tax.

"From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes" ([Matthew 17:25](#)). In Christ's day Rome ruled the world, collecting taxes from all over the Mediterranean world. But taxes were not collected in Rome. Much of the foreign tax money was used to provide free grain and entertainment for the Romans. This was well known in Judea and Galilee, which groaned under taxes imposed not only by the Romans but also by the Herods.

Thus when Jesus asked Peter this question, Peter rightly answered that earthly rulers collected taxes from strangers.

"Then the sons are free" ([17:26](#)). Jesus' conclusion is significant. Because he was the Son of God, he was not obligated to pay the temple tax! Peter had given the wrong answer, whatever his motive had been.

There was, of course, another implication. If God required Israel to pay the temple tax, then the Jewish people could not be "sons." The common first-century assumption that physical descent from Abraham guaranteed a place in God's family was wrong! Faith in Jesus the Messiah, not physical descent from Abraham, makes a person a child of God.

"Lest we offend" ([17:27](#)). Jesus instructed Peter to pay the temple tax with money provided miraculously. There was no need to make an issue of the symbolic meaning of the temple tax. The real issue then as now was Jesus himself, and nothing should be allowed to distract the people's attention from the question of who he was.

JESUS HEALS A MAN BORN BLIND [John 9](#)

Jesus set off an intense controversy when he gave sight to a man who had been blind since birth.

Background of the miracle. [John 8:12](#) records Jesus' affirmation to the Pharisees that "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." The event reported in [John 9](#) is an acted-out parable, demonstrating the truth of Jesus' statement and applying it both physically and spiritually.

Physically, Jesus gave sight to a man who was born blind. This was no restoration of lost sight. It was a creative act; bringing something into being that had not existed before. In the same way, God's creative act is involved when a person is given spiritual sight.

Spiritually, there's a difference between light and darkness, seeing and being blind. The man to whom Jesus gave sight gradually came to realize who Jesus was. This was indicated by his descriptions of the One who healed him. Note the sequence: the Healer was "a Man called Jesus" ([John 9:11](#)); "a prophet" ([John 9:17](#)); "from God" ([John 9:33](#)); and, "Lord" ([John 9:38](#)).

In contrast, the religious leaders who were finally forced to acknowledge that Christ had performed a notable miracle insisted that "this Man is a sinner" ([John 9:24](#)). The blind man saw, while the sighted men were blind to "the light of the world" ([John 9:5](#)).

Parties to the miracle. The entire chapter is devoted to this miracle and its effects. While Jesus performed the miracle and later spoke again with the man who had been healed, the man himself was the focus of the account. The chapter reports a series of intense conversations—between Jesus and his disciples, between the man and the Pharisees, between the parents and the Pharisees, and between the man Jesus. The chapter contains seven scenes:

1. The miracle—[John 9:1–7](#)
2. The man is questioned by neighbors—[John 9:8–12](#)
3. The man is cross-examined by Pharisees—[John 9:13–17](#)
4. The parents are cross-examined—[John 9:18–23](#)
5. The man is cross-examined again—[John 9:24–34](#)



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6. Jesus seeks out the man—[John 9:35–38](#)

7. Significance of the miracle—[John 9:39–41](#)

How the story unfolds. One Sabbath as Jesus and his disciples passed by, they asked him about a man born blind. “Who sinned?” Jesus replied that sin was not the cause of his blindness. Acting as the “light of the world” ([John 9:5](#)), Jesus restored the blind man’s sight.

The miracle set off a furor. Even the man’s neighbors couldn’t believe he was the same person. The man explained what happened and how Jesus gave him sight.

The neighbors brought the man to the Pharisees, who cross-examined him. The miracle caused a debate among these religious leaders. Some argued that a person who would “work” on the Sabbath couldn’t possibly be from God. Others objected, “How can a... sinner do such signs?” When the man himself was asked, he replied, “He is a prophet.”

The Jews [a term John used of the religious leaders] refused to believe the man was born blind until they questioned his parents. The parents insisted that this was their son, and that he had been blind since birth. But they were afraid to say any more, because they knew the leaders had agreed to expel from the synagogue anyone who declared that Jesus was the Christ.

Frustrated and angry, the Jews again called for the man whose sight had been restored. Under their hostile probing, the man asked, perhaps tongue in cheek, if “you also want to become his disciples.” The “also” revealed this man’s commitment to his Healer. When the leaders reacted angrily, the man expressed amazement. “Since the world began,” no one had opened the eyes of one born blind. “If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing” ([John 9:33](#)). This obvious conclusion was scornfully rejected by the religious leaders, and the man was ejected.

Jesus then found him and asked if he believed in the Son of God. As soon as the man learned that Jesus was the Son, he believed and worshiped. Christ then explained the significance of the miracle. He had come to differentiate between the blind and the sighted. His presence showed that those in Israel who claimed to have spiritual insight were actually blind, while those considered spiritually blind recognized Christ, and were given sight. The remark insulted the Pharisees, who challenged him: “Are we blind also?”

Christ’s answer underlined the truth that a deliberate rejection of the One who is the light had condemned them to God’s judgment.

Scene one: the miracle ([John 9:1–7](#)). Jesus restored the sight of a man born blind.

“Who sinned” ([9:2](#)). It was commonly believed by the Jews that serious disabilities were punishment for sin. The question of whether the man or his parents had sinned reflected a misunderstanding of [Exodus 34:7](#). This verse stated that punishment of the guilty extended to the third and fourth generations. Sin corrupts our relationships so deeply that several generations of any family will be affected by serious sin.

“That the works of God should be revealed in him” ([9:3](#)). Tragedies give God an opportunity to reveal himself in unique ways. It was a tragedy that robbed Joni Erickson Tada of her ability to move. But through Joni, the Lord has encouraged thousands, and he continues to display his glory.

We cannot choose how God will glorify himself in us. But we can seek to glorify him whatever our situation.

“Spat on the ground and made clay” ([9:6](#)). Commentators have linked the mode of healing used by Jesus in this situation to the original creation of man from the earth. Irenaeus, an early church father, wrote “That which the artificer—the Word—had omitted to form in the womb he supplied in public, that the works of God might be manifested in him” (Adv. Haer. 15:2).

Scene two: the man was questioned by neighbors ([9:8–12](#)). The stunned neighbors could hardly believe the now-sighted man was the one who had sat and begged. The man explained what happened, giving credit to “a man called Jesus.”

Scene three: the man was cross-examined by Pharisees ([9:13–7](#)). The neighbors brought the man to the Pharisees, who were confused and upset by the reported healing.

Pharisees. Members of this influential group were committed to keeping every detail of God’s Law as interpreted by the rabbis.



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“Does not keep the Sabbath” (9:16). By the Pharisee’s definition, Jesus’ healing of this blind man was “work,” for he had “made clay” ([John 9:6](#)). The Pharisees’ legalistic interpretation of Sabbath-keeping was more important to them than a stunning act of God. Let’s be careful not to let our theology keep us from recognition of a true work of God.

“How can a... sinner do such signs?” (9:16). There were only two possible answers. Either Jesus was not a sinner or Jesus did not perform the miracle. The “Jews” [the religious leaders] chose not to believe in the miracle—until they questioned the parents and found they couldn’t deny it. They were not willing to admit the only other reasonable possibility—that Jesus was not a sinner but a man of God.

Scene four: the parents were cross-examined by the Pharisees (9:18–23). The Pharisees were finally convinced that the man had been blind since birth. But the parents refused to say any more out of fear that they would be “put out of the synagogue” ([John 9:22](#)). A person put out of the synagogue would be cut off from assistance if he fell into poverty or dire need. A person with a business would not be able to trade with people in the community. Many who had been friends would no longer speak to the ostracized person. To confess Christ in the face of the threat of being “put out of the synagogue” took a courage that the parents lacked.

Scene five: the Pharisees cross-examined the man again (9:24–34). The Jews refused to consider that their interpretation of Sabbath Law might be wrong. Instead, they rejected a sign which, like so many others, had identified Jesus as God’s spokesman. The key word in these verses is “know.”

The Pharisees claimed to know based on rabbinical interpretations of the biblical command not to work on the Sabbath. They concluded:

- We know this man is a sinner ([9:24](#)).
- We know God spoke through Moses ([9:29](#)).
- We do not know where this man came from ([9:29](#)).

The man claimed to know based on the miracle and the obvious:

- I know that while I was blind, now I see ([9:25](#)).
- We know that God does not hear sinners ([9:31](#)).
- We know that God hears anyone who worships him and does his will ([9:31](#)).
- If this man were not from God, he could do nothing ([9:33](#)).

The once-blind man saw the issues clearly and held fast to his convictions in spite of pressure from the religious leaders. What moved the man was not fear of these powerful leaders but wonder at their claim not to know where Jesus was from. There was no question in his mind—Jesus was a man sent from God.

The leaders followed through on their threat and “cast out” the man. The implication is that he was put out of the synagogue, not just their presence ([John 9:34](#)). We suspect that the man cared little for their punishment. He could see! Nothing Christ’s enemies could take away was a loss—compared with the wonderful gift Christ had given him.

Scene six: Jesus sought out the man (9:35–38). When Jesus found the man, he led him to the full commitment of faith. Christ identified himself as the Son of God, and the man immediately affirmed, “Lord, I believe! And he worshiped Him” ([John 9:38](#)).

How often a gracious work in our lives gently leads us to faith’s full commitment.

Scene seven: the significance of the miracle (9:39–41). Christ’s own comment brought the miracle’s meaning into focus. Jesus himself is the pivot on which every person’s eternal destiny turns.

Only those who admit they are lost and blind, then look to Christ for spiritual sight, will find the salvation he offers. Any who claim they can see—like the Pharisees—will remain blind to the gospel offer. And their sin will remain.

Deliberate rejection of Jesus, the light of the world, leaves a person in eternal darkness. How good it is to see the light, and come to know God in his Son.



JESUS HEALS A WOMAN BOUND BY SATAN [Luke 13:10-17](#)

Jesus healed a woman with a chronic back problem on the Sabbath.

Background of the miracle. This is another Sabbath healing. Like other healings on this holy day, it offended the religious leaders. Their rules for what was proper on the Sabbath went far beyond the simple biblical proscription against work ([Ex. 20:8-11](#)).

The rabbis' rulings made allowance for a physician to attend a person with a life-threatening emergency on the Sabbath. But in their eyes, it was not lawful to help a person with a chronic illness. Such an illness could wait for treatment on some other day!

Jesus as God had created the Sabbath. He was not bound by their human regulations. This particular healing also revealed the fatal flaw in rabbinic Judaism. Rules had become the ultimate reality, and the true message of God's Word had been missed.

Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah had predicted this misuse of Scripture and described its consequences. In chapter [28](#) of his book, the inspired prophet characterized the message of God's Word as "the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest," and as "the refreshing." Yet Israel refused to listen. And so to Israel the Word of God was to become

Precept... upon precept, precept upon precept,

Line upon line, line upon line,

Here a little, there a little ([Isa. 28:10](#)).

What was the result of this focus on the details of the divine Law to the exclusion of its meaning? The divine judgment was,

That they might go and fall

backward, and be broken

And snared and caught ([Isa. 28:13](#)).

By turning God's Word into lists of rules to keep, the grace of God had been overlooked. By piling up precept upon precept, Israel committed itself to a religion of works which so hardened the religious leaders that they would not acknowledge the Messiah. The irony is that his coming was intended to free God's people from everything that bound them.

Both the grace of God and the blindness of legalism are shown clearly in this Sabbath miracle.

Parties to the miracle. In relating this miracle, Luke draws our attention to Jesus, the infirm woman, and the reactions of the ruler of the synagogue and "all the multitude."

Jesus. Jesus initiated the healing, without being asked.

The woman. The woman was referred to as "a daughter of Abraham" ([Luke 13:16](#)). The reference was not to her physical descent from Abraham, although the people in the synagogue may have understood it this way. The reference was to her faith: she had a faith like Abraham's. He believed God and was declared righteous ([Gen. 15:7](#)).

The ruler of the synagogue. One of the responsibilities of the *archesynagogos* or ruler of the synagogue was to maintain order in the Sabbath services. This man was committed to the strict interpretations of the Law which characterized the Pharisees. His indignant reaction was typical of those described in [Isaiah 28](#). He missed the refreshing intent of the law, transforming it into precepts which blinded him to God's grace.

The "multitude." This was Luke's term for the ordinary people, who saw what Jesus did and responded openly without the blindness of the religious leaders.

How the story unfolds. As Jesus was teaching, he saw a woman with a bent back. She had not been able to stand upright for 18 years. Jesus called to her and announced that she was loosed from her infirmity. Then he touched her and she straightened up. This scandalized the ruler of the synagogue, who rebuked Jesus for healing on the Sabbath.



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Christ called him a hypocrite, pointing out that even the legalistic Pharisees untied their animals on the Sabbath to give them a drink. How much more precious was the daughter of Abraham whom he had loosed, after she had been tied in knots by Satan all these years!

The response shamed Jesus' opponents, but the common people rejoiced over the wonderful things he was doing.

"He called her to Him" (Luke 13:12). This was no response to prayer or faith by the woman. Jesus initiated the encounter and acted to heal the woman. Christ showed compassion. His action showed the dramatic contrast between God's attitude toward the hurting and the attitude of the nation's religious leaders.

"Loosed from your infirmity" (13:12). The terms Luke used in describing this event were common among physicians of that time. He also provided a careful description of the stages of the healing. First the woman's cramped muscles were relaxed [loosed]. Then Jesus touched the woman to strengthen her spine so she could stand upright.

"Glorified God" (13:13). The woman was thrilled by what God had done. What a contrast with the indignant reaction of the ruler of the synagogue. Would the *archesynagogos* have been upset if *he* were the person healed? The capacity to rejoice with others who are blessed by God is one indication of God's work in our own lives.

"Hypocrite!" This word described Greek actors who held masks over their faces to represent the person whom they portrayed. It came to mean play-acting or inconsistency—pretending to be someone you are not or behaving differently in public than in private.

Jesus' charge was leveled at the inconsistent behavior of the Pharisees. Their rules allowed for the needs of farm animals on the Sabbath, while refusing to give consideration to the needs of people. And they claimed to represent God!

Christ's concern for a woman who had suffered for 18 years revealed the heart of God while exposing the grudging attitudes of the Pharisees. No wonder Jesus' adversaries were "put to shame" (Luke 13:17)!

"Loose his ox" (13:15). Note the play on words in the story. Jesus loosed the woman (Luke 13:12) and was criticized by a man who would never hesitate to loose a farm animal.

"Satan has bound" (13:16). This was not a case of demon possession but of demonic *oppression*. Satan was identified as the cause of this woman's physical disability, but Jesus did not indicate that he dominated her personality. The apostle Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was another example of this phenomenon (2 Cor. 12:7). (See *Every Good and Evil Angel in the Bible*.)

"All His adversaries were put to shame" (13:17). This phrase does not mean that Jesus' adversaries *felt* ashamed. "Put to shame" means that the emptiness of their claim to represent God was exposed for everyone to see.

This miracle of Jesus revealed clearly the heart of God. Other hearts were revealed that day as well: the woman's, the synagogue ruler's—and even the hearts of the onlookers, who praised God for Jesus' good works.

JESUS HEALS A MAN WITH DROPSY [Luke 14:1–6](#)

While eating Sabbath dinner at a Pharisee's house Jesus healed a man with dropsy.

Background of the miracle. This is the fourth Sabbath miracle reported by Luke (6:6–11; 13:10–17). It reminds us that healing on the Sabbath was a major cause of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. See pages 186 and 225 for background.

Parties to the miracle. Luke focuses on the interaction between Jesus and a hostile group of "lawyers and Pharisees" who were observing Jesus closely. The parties to this miracle are:

Jesus. Jesus was dining at the home of a "ruler of the Pharisees." The phrase suggests that the man (an *archon*, ruler) was a member of the Sanhedrin and belonged to the Pharisee party.

Lawyers and Pharisees. A "lawyer" was a person versed in the written Law [Old Testament] and the oral Law [traditional interpretations]. The Pharisees were members of a small but influential group that argued for the strictest interpretation of written and oral Law.



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The man with dropsy. Dropsy was an illness caused by a “serious abnormal accumulation of fluid in the body’s tissues.”

How the story unfolds. Jesus was eating at the home of a leading Pharisee, where he was being watched closely by the other guests. These guests were also members of the religious elite. A man with dropsy was also at the meal.

Jesus took the initiative and asked whether it was “lawful” to heal on the Sabbath. When no one was willing to risk an answer, Jesus healed the man with dropsy.

Jesus then asked which of them would not “immediately” help one of their farm animals which had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath. They couldn’t answer! They couldn’t rebut Christ’s actions or his argument.

“A certain man who had dropsy” (Luke 14:2). Many commentators have suggested the man with the dropsy had been planted at this gathering by Jesus’ enemies. There is good reason for this theory. In the first century, serious diseases were thought to be God’s punishment for sin. The host was a “leading Pharisee,” and his guests were members of the religious elite. These men normally would have been unwilling to sit down to a meal with any “sinner.”

The man was seated directly “before him,” so Jesus could hardly fail to notice him (Luke 14:2). Finally, when the man was healed, Jesus “let him go” (Luke 14:4).

How like the Pharisees to use others in an effort to trap or discredit Jesus.

“They kept silent” (Luke 14:4). No one was willing to risk answering Jesus’ question about whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath.

“Which of you?” (14:5). After healing the man with dropsy, Jesus asked another question. Which of them wouldn’t pull from a pit an animal which had fallen in on the Sabbath? Members of the Qumran sect held that an animal which fell into a pit should not be lifted out on the Sabbath. But the dominant view in Jesus’ time was that an ox or donkey which had fallen into a pit could be helped out “immediately” (*Shabbat 128b*).

To this they “could not” reply. There was no answer they could give without condemning themselves.

The significance of the miracle. Jesus’ miracles had several vital functions. On one level, they served to reveal God and demonstrate his compassion. On another level, they served as signs which marked Jesus as the promised Messiah. On yet another level, they exposed human hearts, showing some to be filled with faith and others to be hypocritical and far from the attitudes of the Lord. In this miracle report, God’s compassionate heart and the hypocrisy of Jesus’ antagonists are clearly revealed. The Pharisees would rush to save one of their valuable animals, but they cared nothing for a person in need.

The miracles of Jesus show not only who he was, but who we are apart from God’s transforming grace.

JESUS RAISES LAZARUS [John 11](#)

Jesus restored life to Lazarus three days after his death.

Background of the miracle. Jesus had already restored the life of a widow’s son ([Luke 7](#)) and Jairus’s daughter ([Luke 8](#); [Mark 5](#)). Each of these restorations occurred immediately after the person had died.

The custom in first-century Judaism was to bury an individual on the day of his death. But the Jews were aware of the possibility of a coma, so they would check a tomb for three days after the burial to see if the victim had revived. After three days, all hope of awakening from a coma was gone, and the body would have begun to decay.

The raising of Lazarus was significant because it took place the full three days after he had died, plus one extra day ([John 11:39](#))! There could be no doubt in anyone’s mind that Christ had restored a person who was truly dead.

It is no wonder that this most spectacular of Jesus’ miracles troubled the chief priests and Pharisees. After this, they were certain that “if we let him alone like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation” ([John 11:48](#)). Thus the greatest proof of who Jesus was became the critical event that drove the Jewish hierarchy to seek Jesus’ death ([John 11:53](#)).

There can be no vacillation for modern believers. We must accept Jesus for who he is, acknowledging him as Lord. If we fail to do this, we take sides with the rulers of first-century Israel and choose to force him out of our lives.



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Parties to the miracle. The entire chapter is devoted to this miracle account and Jesus' interaction with the people involved. These include: Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus; the disciples, and especially Thomas. John also reports the reaction of those who had come to comfort the sisters as well as the response of the Jewish leaders.

Jesus. Jesus is portrayed in this account as one who dearly loved Lazarus and his sisters. Yet he failed to respond to an urgent plea to come and heal his friend. The delay seems out of character. But when Jesus finally did arrive, Mary—perhaps with some hint of rebuke—declared, “If You had been here, my brother would not have died” ([John 11:32](#)).

Jesus called on the sisters to believe that he had power over death in the present as well as at history's end. Then Jesus called to Lazarus, who stumbled out of his tomb—still wrapped in the strips of linen that served as burial clothes.

The disciples. Jesus and his disciples were across the Jordan River in Perea when word of Lazarus's illness arrived ([John 10:40](#)). They had retreated in part because the hostility of the leaders had become so intense that Christ was in danger of being stoned ([John 11:8](#)).

After the messenger's arrival, Jesus stayed in Perea for two more days. Then he told his disciples, “Let us go to Judea again” ([John 11:7](#)). The disciples were afraid. They objected when Christ told them that “Lazarus is asleep,” assuming that Jesus meant that Lazarus was resting after the crisis had passed. But Jesus meant that Lazarus was dead. He stated his intention to wake him. The disciples' fears were reflected by Thomas, who declared, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him” ([John 11:16](#)).

Thomas. This disciple is commonly known as “doubting” Thomas because of his refusal to believe in Christ's resurrection until he could touch the wounds in Jesus' hands and side. But here we see Thomas in a different light, as “loyal” Thomas.

Thomas was certain that danger awaited all of them in Judea. But he encouraged the disciples to stay with Christ. Thomas had no hope; he did not expect to die *for* Jesus, or to be able to turn the danger aside. The best Thomas and the others could expect was to die *with* Jesus. And this Thomas was ready to do. Nothing could separate loyal Thomas from his Lord.

We are blessed because God has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” ([Heb. 13:5](#)). Courageous Thomas reminds us that we are to be as committed to God as he is to us—whatever the danger, whatever the cost.

Martha. She and her sister Mary were close to Jesus. They often sheltered him in their Bethany home when he visited Jerusalem. Bethany, about twenty miles from Perea, was only two miles outside Jerusalem. Christ stayed at Bethany when Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims during the annual festivals.

When Martha saw Jesus, she expressed faith in him: “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But Martha went on to say that “even now” ([11:28](#)) she believed God would give Jesus whatever he asked.

This statement was one of great faith, but even Martha's faith couldn't grasp Jesus' meaning when he told her, “Your brother will rise again” ([John 11:23](#)). She assumed that Jesus was speaking of the final resurrection at history's end. Jesus then affirmed that he was the resurrection and the life. The eschatological hope was present in his person. God's plans and promises were fulfilled *in him*.

Martha, still unaware of what Jesus intended, confessed her belief that Jesus truly was the Christ, the Son of God.

How often Martha is remembered only for her attention to dinner preparations and her criticism of Mary, who chose instead to listen to Jesus' teachings ([Luke 10:40, 41](#)). Here we see Martha in a far more flattering light, as one whose faith in Jesus burned bright and true—and one whose faith was about to be rewarded!

Mary. Mary, the second sister, then came out to greet Jesus. Like Martha, she expressed her faith: “If You had been here, my brother would not have died.” But unlike her sister, Mary sobbed as she spoke. Even if she shared her sister's hope, she must not have felt it in her moment of loss.

Lazarus. We know little about Lazarus. He is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, although we are told that Jesus had developed a deep affection for him. Even after Lazarus was raised, John's account mentions nothing of what Lazarus felt or said or did. But he was a silent and powerful witness to the power of Jesus.



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There are many unknown people whose actual words have not been passed on to future generations, but whose restored lives serve as powerful witnesses to Jesus Christ. Many times a believer does not need to say anything: the difference Jesus makes in his or her life will shine through brightly. May our lives, renewed and transformed by Jesus, be the witness to our neighbors that Lazarus was to his.

The mourners. The mourners who had come to comfort Mary and Martha were stunned by Jesus' miracle. Many "believed in him" ([John 11:45](#)). But others rushed to report to the Pharisees what Jesus had done. By this time, the entire city of Jerusalem was aware of the attitude of the Pharisees toward Jesus. Those who hurried to them certainly didn't go with an intent to witness!

The chief priests and Pharisees. These men had to admit that "this man works many signs" ([11:47](#)). But they didn't intend to submit to him. Instead, their hostile attitude toward Jesus became even more fixed, and they determined to kill him—one way or another.

Caiaphas. As the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas served as president of the Sanhedrin. He summed up the fears of the religious leaders and passed judgment. Jesus must die.

In saying "it is expedient... that one man should die for the people" ([11:50](#)), Caiaphas was representing the leaders' concern. As the founder of a messianic movement, Jesus' teaching might stimulate a rebellion, bringing Roman armies against Judea. Some interpreters have argued that Caiaphas' reference to the Romans' taking away "both our place and nation" expressed fear for the temple ("our place"). It is far more likely he was referring to the privileges enjoyed by his own priestly class.

While Caiaphas had one thing in mind, his words were prophetic. Christ would die for the nation—not to keep the Roman armies away, but to defeat sin and Satan and make eternal life available to all.

How the story unfolds. Jesus and his disciples were about twenty miles from Bethany when a messenger arrived with word that Lazarus was sick. For two days Jesus did nothing. Then he told his disciples it was time to return to Judea, explaining that Lazarus was "asleep" (has died). The fearful disciples accompanied Jesus on the day-long walk back to Bethany.

Martha hurried out to meet Jesus, expressing her belief that if Jesus had been there her brother would not have died. Jesus announced that he was the resurrection and the life, leading her to confess her belief that he was the Christ, the Son of God.

Martha then brought out Mary, who also expressed her belief that if Jesus had been with them her brother would not have died. Mary was weeping, heartbroken; and as Jesus followed her to Lazarus's tomb, he also wept.

At the tomb, Jesus told the onlookers to roll away the stone that closed the burial place. Martha objected. Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days: there would be a stench. But Jesus reminded her of their earlier conversation, and the stone was rolled away.

Jesus then thanked the Father aloud for always hearing him. He offered this prayer for the sake of the bystanders, that they might believe God had sent him. Jesus then shouted, "Lazarus, come forth!" ([John 11:43](#)). And the dead man, restored to life, stumbled out into the light, still wrapped in his grave clothes and his face covered with a cloth.

On Jesus' command, the tight wrappings were removed, and many of the stunned onlookers believed in Jesus.

Other witnesses to the miracle hurried into Jerusalem to carry word to the religious leaders. These men gathered almost in despair. What could they do? Jesus was performing such amazing miracles that soon everyone would believe in him!

There was no thought in their minds that *they* should consider his claims. Jesus was too great a threat to their own position and to the *status quo*! They concluded that Jesus must die. From that day forward, they set about getting rid of this "Christ." John revealed in his Gospel that they even plotted to kill Lazarus, whose existence was a convincing witness to Jesus' power ([John 12:10, 11](#)).

Jesus, knowing their intent, withdrew with his disciples to a remote town ([John 11:54](#)), where he stayed quietly until the next Passover arrived ([John 12:1](#)).

"He whom you love is sick" ([John 11:3](#)). The sisters had no doubt of Jesus' love for their brother. How they must have anguished as the messenger hurried to Jesus. But before he could cover the 20 miles to tell Jesus, Lazarus died.



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“For the glory of God” (11:4). Although Lazarus was dead when the messenger arrived, Christ said that the sickness would not *end in death*. The end would be life restored, and Christ glorified.

Our sicknesses too—even our last sickness—will not end in death. History is rushing even now toward God’s intended end—resurrection and life eternal for Christ’s own. For the glory of God!

“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (11:5). It is often harder for those left behind to sense God’s love for them than to believe that God loved the person who has died. John through his Gospel wanted us to know that Jesus does care, deeply, for the grieving.

“Our friend Lazarus sleeps” (11:11). The Bible appropriately speaks of death as sleep ([1 Cor. 15:51](#); [1 Thess. 4:14](#)). We can be confident as we lie down at the end of our earthly existence that we will awaken, and rise again.

“He groaned in the spirit and was troubled” (11:33). This—and the shortest verse in Scripture, “Jesus wept” ([John 11:35](#))—reminds us that even as God permits our suffering, he feels with us.

Christ knew that he was about to bring Lazarus back to life. But he did not discount the pain of his dear friends. Instead, he entered into their pain, felt it deeply, and wept with them.

It is good for us to remember that God is committed to bringing good out of all the things that happen to us ([Rom. 8:28](#)). Yet it is important to remember that God takes our hand in the meantime and does not abandon us in our sorrow. He feels our pain. And he weeps with us as we grieve. And then, when the time is right, God will wipe away all tears from our eyes, welcoming us into the glory he intends for us and our loved ones to share ([Rev. 21:4](#)).

“I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). There is no clearer statement in Scripture of the significance of Jesus for us individually. He is the resurrection and the life. His is the power; he is the source. Those who believe in him may die physically, but they will live eternally. This is his promise to us if we will trust in Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

This truth points us toward the ultimate significance of the miracle. Jesus’ claim to be the resurrection and the life was proven by the restoration of Lazarus. Jesus’ deeds always backed up his words.

Today we can contemplate this miracle, finding in it a foreshadowing of what lies ahead. One day Christ will return and shout to our dead, “Come forth.” Then we will arise, and together with the believers alive in that day, rise up to meet the Lord in the air ([1 Thess. 4:16, 17](#)).

Truly Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

JESUS CLEANSSES TEN LEPERS [Luke 17:11–19](#)

Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one, a Samaritan, returned to give glory to God.

Background of the miracle. In the first century, the ancient Jewish hostility toward the Samaritans had been revived. The Samaritans were despised as offspring of pagan peoples brought into the territory of the old Northern Kingdom, Israel, by the Assyrians in the 720s B.C. The Samaritans claimed descent from the Jewish patriarchs, but this claim was angrily disputed by the Jews.

A little over 100 years before Jesus was born, John Hyrcanus had ruled in Judea and had destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerazim. In Christ’s time, the Samaritans showed their hostility by refusing shelter to anyone traveling to Jerusalem ([Mark 3:17](#)). One of the most serious insults hurled at Jesus by the religious leaders was to call him a Samaritan ([John 8:48](#)).

Against this background, we understand Luke’s observation that as Jesus was going to Jerusalem, he “passed through the midst” of Samaria and Galilee ([Luke 17:11](#)). The Greek word is *dia meson*, “along the border between” the two territories. Jesus apparently avoided the direct route to the Holy City from Galilee, which would have taken him through Samaria.

There, along the border of Samaria, ten lepers called out to Jesus and asked for mercy. At least one of these lepers was a Samaritan. In their misery Jew and Samaritan formed a bond that the healthy were unwilling to consider.

Parties to the miracle. The account identifies ten men who were lepers. Apparently most were Jews, as Jesus told them to show themselves to the priests. This action was prescribed for those who had been lepers but had become



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free of the disease. Only a priest could certify that a person had been healed. This assured the person could retake his or her place as a member of the community.

How the story unfolds. When Jesus entered an unnamed village, ten lepers—standing at an appropriate distance because of their uncleanness—cried out for mercy. Jesus told them to show themselves to the priests, and “as they went” (17:14) they were cleansed [healed]. One of the ten hurried back to thank Jesus and praise God when he realized he had been healed. And this man was a Samaritan. Jesus wondered aloud where the others were. Commending the foreigner’s faith, Jesus sent the man on his way.

“As they went, they were cleansed” (Luke 17:14). The lepers trusted Jesus enough to set out to see the priests. They were cleansed “as they went.”

Some believers hope God will give them “faith” so they can obey him. What a tragic misunderstanding. Faith is expressed in our obedience; as we obey God, he works in our lives.

“Were there not ten cleansed?” (17:17). Only one of those who realized he had been healed returned to thank Jesus, giving glory to God. Commentators have been sharply critical of the other nine. About the kindest thing said of them is that they were ungrateful. Others have wondered whether the nine were afraid Jesus might place demands on them if they returned. Still other interpreters have suggested that the nine, once healed, wanted nothing more to do with their benefactor.

The text doesn’t explore the motives of the nine. Perhaps they were so eager to go home again that they didn’t pause for even a moment. Whatever their motive, we are hardly in a position to condemn them. How often we have also taken our blessings for granted. Many of us are strangers to thanksgiving, just like these nine healed lepers.

“This foreigner” (17:18). The fact that the one who did return was a foreigner is significant. Jesus was drawing near the end of his earthly ministry. He had healed hundreds in Israel; yet his own people would soon join in the cries of “crucify him!” As history records, it was mostly foreigners who rejoiced in Israel’s Christ and glorified him with their praise.

“Your faith has made you well” (17:19). The nine missed hearing Jesus’ explanation of their healing. As the nine hurried to the priests, they may have assumed that it was their obedience that made them well. Perhaps they thought their willingness to undergo the ancient ritual examination was critical to their healing. Jesus had somehow made them well. But hadn’t they played their role in their own healing?

The Samaritan knew better. It was Jesus himself who had brought about the cure. It was faith in Jesus which had channeled the power that flowed from our Lord. Faith in Jesus, demonstrated by doing as Jesus said, had made all the difference.

JESUS GIVES SIGHT TO BLIND BARTIMAEUS [Matthew 20:29–34](#); [Mark 10:46–52](#); [Luke 18:35–43](#)

While on the way to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus stopped to heal a blind beggar.

Background of the miracle. There are two critical differences in the details given in the three gospel accounts of this miracle.

Mark indicates the miracle took place on the way out of Jericho, while Luke says the miracle occurred when Jesus was entering the city. But in the first century, there were two Jerichos: old Jericho, which was largely a ruin; and new Jericho, an attractive city built by Herod just to the south of the old town. Apparently the miracle took place on the border between the old and new cities, as Jesus was leaving one and entering the other.

Mark and Luke mention only one blind man, whom Mark identifies as Bartimaeus. Matthew indicates that Jesus healed two blind men. It is clear from the other details that the Gospel writers describe the same incident, so we can assume that Bartimaeus was the more prominent of the two. For a discussion of this type of supposed contradiction in the biblical text, see the discussion of the demoniac of Gadara, p. 198.

More significant than the supposed contradictions is the fact that this last of Jesus’ healing miracles took place on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. In Matthew, this miracle concludes a major section dedicated to the theme of greatness.

Jesus’ disciples had asked about greatness ([Matt. 18:1](#)). Jesus called a little child and taught, “Whoever humbles himself as this little child” is greatest in the kingdom of heaven ([Matt. 18:4](#)). After showing the disciples how to live together as



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God's little children ([Matt. 18:5–35](#)), Matthew records a series of incidents exposing the fallacy of seeking greatness through keeping the Law ([Matt. 19:1–15](#)), through humanitarian works ([Matt. 19:16–29](#)), and through relying on works rather than on God's grace ([Matt. 20:1–19](#)). Then, when two of the disciples sent their mother to ask Jesus for the most important posts in his coming kingdom, Jesus used the occasion to instruct them on true greatness.

The Gentiles thought of greatness as lording it over others. But, Jesus said, “Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” ([Matt. 20:27, 28](#)).

Immediately after this—while he was on his way to the cross and burdened with the awareness of his coming fate—Jesus paused in answer to the cry of the blind men and asked, “What do you want Me to do for you?” ([Matt. 20:32](#)).

How clearly this last healing miracle illustrated what Jesus had just taught his disciples. The truly great of God's kingdom set aside personal burdens and say to others “What do you want me to do for you?” Like Jesus, the great in God's kingdom give of themselves to meet other people's needs.

Parties to the miracle. The story in Matthew is told simply, with three major voices.

Jesus. In spite of his own heavy burden, Jesus stopped to meet the needs of two blind men.

The blind men. The blind men realized that someone special was passing by. When they learned it was Jesus, they cried out to him as “Son of David” and begged for mercy.

The crowd. The crowd tried to silence the blind men. Jesus was too important to be bothered by such as them! The crowd thus revealed a lack of concern for individuals which contrasted with the servant attitude exemplified by Jesus and to which he calls his followers.

How the story unfolds. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. Although the roads were filled with travelers heading to the holy city for Passover, an unusually large crowd was following him. When two blind men, one of whom was named Bartimaeus ([Mark 10:46](#)), realized that Jesus was near, they began to shout. Addressing Jesus by his messianic title as Son of David, they begged for mercy.

The crowd told them to be quiet, but they cried out even louder. Responding to their cries, Jesus stopped and called them to him. At that, the crowd's attitude changed, and they told the blind men to cheer up. Jesus was waiting for them ([Mark 10:49](#))!

Jesus asked the blind men what they wanted, and they told him they wanted their sight. Christ, again moved by compassion, touched their eyes ([Matt. 20:34](#)) and told them to receive their sight ([Luke 18:42](#)), indicating that their faith had made them well.

“They told him” ([Luke 18:36](#)). Luke describes the blind man's curiosity as he heard a large crowd passing by. We can almost hear him asking, “What's happening? Who is it?”

“Have mercy... Son of David” ([Matt. 20:31](#)). Each account agrees that the blind man/men addressed Jesus as the Son of David. This was a messianic title, reflecting the conclusion reached by Bartimaeus and his companion that this Jesus, of whom they had heard many stories, was indeed the Messiah. He had power to help, so they cried out to him.

“Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus” ([Mark 10:46](#)). Mark frequently provides details not mentioned by the other Gospel writers. In this miracle account, Mark alone reports the crowd's change of attitude ([10:49](#)), revealing that when Bartimaeus realized that Jesus was waiting for him, he discarded his outer cloak to hurry to Jesus ([10:50](#)). It is likely that he had spread the cloak over his knees so passersby could drop in coins.

In view of Mark's typical attention to such detail, we should not be surprised that he gave the name of one of the two blind beggars.

“What do you want Me to do for you?” ([Matt. 20:32](#)). This one sentence sums up the servant attitude which Jesus displayed. This is the attitude which he desires for all who would be truly great in his kingdom.

“What do you want Me to do for you?” ([Mark 10:51](#)). There is no question that Jesus knew the need and the cure. Why then did he ask this question?



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Some suggest he wanted to increase the blind man's faith. But it is more likely a reflection of a teaching on prayer found in [James 4:2](#): "You do not have because you do not ask." Prayer is to be specific. We are to identify our needs and bring them to Jesus, asking him to meet these needs.

It may be helpful for us when we pray to raise the question Jesus asked. What do we want God to do for us? We must not tell him how to meet the need. But we must define our needs, and then bring them to him.

"Jesus had compassion" ([Matt. 20:34](#)). Caring about others is essential if we are to be servants. Jesus was not acting a part. Unlike some whose claims to "feel your pain" is mere posturing, Jesus was deeply moved by the suffering of those in need. Servanthood is not technique, but a heart response to others which reflects Jesus' deep concern.

They followed Him ([20:34](#)). This comment most likely means that the blind men literally followed Jesus up the steep fifteen-mile trail from Jericho to Jerusalem, where Passover was about to be celebrated.

"All the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God" ([Luke 18:43](#)). The road to Jerusalem led through Jericho. Thousands of Jewish families would have passed along it on their way to celebrate the religious festivals in the Holy City. Bartimaeus and his blind friend were probably fixtures in Jericho, known and recognized by many.

This verse shows that servanthood brings praise to God. The people praised God when they witnessed the miracle. On the other hand, Jesus' servanthood did not protect him from that hostility from others which ultimately brought him to the cross.

The meaning of the miracle. Jesus' last miracle of healing is significant in several ways. The miracle shows what blessings were available if only Israel, like the blind men, had acknowledged Jesus as the Son of David. It also illustrates Jesus' servant attitude and serves as an example for us.

Through this miracle, we are also reminded that the key to claiming the blessings that God is eager to pour out is faith in Jesus Christ and his ability to meet our every need.

JESUS CURSES A FIG TREE [Matthew 21:17-22](#); [Mark 11:12-14, 20-24](#)

Jesus cursed a fig tree whose leaves promised a fruit it had not produced.

Background of the miracle. Fig leaves appear about the same time as the fruit, or a little after. Thus the fact that this tree was in leaf should have indicated it was also bearing fruit, although it was not yet the season for figs ([Mark 11:13](#)). The tree's appearance promised something which it didn't deliver.

Most interpreters take this miracle as an acted-out parable. The fig tree represents Israel, which had the appearance of bearing fruit but which in fact was barren. Jesus cursed the tree not because of its failure to bear fruit but because its appearance was a lie. The tree's leaves advertised a fruitfulness that did not exist—just as Israel's outward honoring of God and his law advertised a relationship with the Lord which they didn't have.

When it was cursed by Jesus, the fig tree withered. Its appearance at last matched the reality of its fruitless state. How soon Israel would also wither. In A.D. 70, just a few short decades after this incident, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. With its temple destroyed, the priesthood set aside, and its familiar worship patterns forever lost, the nation of Israel withered indeed.

While Matthew's arrangement of this account is topical, Mark provides a chronological account. Between the cursing of the fig tree and its withering, Jesus cleansed the temple—an event which showed the bareness of Israel's worship.

Parties to the miracle. The story mentions only Jesus, his disciples, and the fig tree.

Jesus. This is the only event in the Gospels in which Jesus used his power to destroy rather than to heal or restore. The withering of the fig tree reminds us that God is not only a God of grace but a God of judgment as well.

The disciples. The disciples were amazed when the tree that Jesus cursed withered away so quickly. Their question about how this was possible led to a brief teaching by Jesus on prayer.

The fig tree. The fig tree is an image of Israel, just like the vineyard of [Isaiah 5:1-7](#) and the figs of [Jeremiah 8:13](#) and [24:1-8](#). The "sin" of the fig tree was to make a show of fruitfulness when in fact it was barren, even as Israel's response to Jesus revealed the spiritual emptiness of God's people.



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How the story unfolds. Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem the day after his triumphal entry when he saw a fig tree with leaves but no fruit. Jesus cursed the tree, declaring, “Let no one eat fruit from you ever again” ([Mark 11:14](#)).

In Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple and drove out those who “bought and sold” in it. The temple was supposed to be “a house of prayer for all the nations,” but God’s people had made it a “den of thieves” ([Mark 11:15–17](#)). The scribes and chief priests wanted to kill Jesus, but they hesitated to act out of fear of the people.

The next morning when Jesus and his disciples were returning to the city, Peter pointed out the tree that Jesus had cursed the day before. It had withered away, “dried up from the roots” ([Mark 11:20](#)).

Jesus used the occasion to encourage his disciples to “have faith in God,” and reminded them that with prayer, even the impossible could become a reality.

“Jesus went into the temple” ([Mark 11:15f](#)). The report of Christ’s second cleansing of the temple (see [John 2:13–17](#)) is sandwiched between the two parts of the story of the fig tree. Jesus drove out the moneychangers and the merchants who were buying and selling in the temple court. The temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations. But Israel’s leaders had made it a “den of thieves.”

The temple area referred to in this account was the outer court, or “court of the Gentiles.” The priests supervised the merchants who sold sacrificial animals here and exchanged foreign coins for “temple currency.” These businessmen were permitted to charge a fee of about 4 percent of the value of any money exchanged. But the high priestly family which controlled the temple at this time was known for its greed. Jesus’ characterization of the market as a “den of thieves” suggests that these limits had been exceeded.

Even more serious, however, was the corruption of a place which God intended to be set apart as a “house of prayer for all nations” ([Isa. 56:7](#)). Israel’s fig tree had leaves; its temple erected to the glory of God was one of the wonders of the ancient world. But the traffic in the temple court revealed that the practices of her people were barren indeed.

“Whoever says to this mountain” ([Mark 11:22](#)). The disciples, shocked at the rapid withering of the fig tree, stimulated a brief teaching on prayer. In the first century, any great difficulty or impossible task was frequently referred to as a “mountain.” Jesus was speaking metaphorically, reminding his disciples that God was able to do what human beings cannot. We are thus to rely on him and bring life’s challenges to the Lord. We can have complete confidence that God will deal with the greatest of our difficulties, even though a way out may appear to be as impossible as commanding a mountain to move itself into the sea.

The meaning of the miracle. The cleansing of the temple and Jesus’ comments on prayer should not distract our attention from the miracle itself. The barren fig tree, whose leaves promised a fruit which the tree did not produce, was judged by Christ. It would never deceive hungry travelers again.

In a similar way, Israel would also be judged. Its way of life would wither when the temple and its sacrifices were taken away. A different form of Judaism would take the place of its familiar pattern of life and worship. Root and branch, the old would soon be gone.

JESUS RESTORES MALCHUS’S EAR [Matthew 26:51–56](#); [Mark 14:46, 47](#); [Luke 22:50, 51](#); [John 18:10, 11](#)

When Peter struck a member of the mob that had come to take Jesus, he cut off part of the ear of a man named Malchus. Jesus touched the ear and healed it.

Background of the miracle. Jesus’ last miracle before his death was performed on the night of his capture and trial, just hours before his crucifixion. A mob led by Judas arrested him on the Mount of Olives in the garden of Gethsemane.

Only John, who was from a wealthy family which maintained a large house in Jerusalem, names Malchus. He was “the” servant of the high priest, an important official in his own right and clearly a person whom John knew. It is ironic that Jesus’ last miracle of healing was performed for an enemy who had come with the mob to make sure Christ was arrested.

Parties to the miracle. The miracle is not the focus of the story, but it seems almost an aside. Judas led a mob to Gethsemane to take Jesus prisoner. Peter, named only in John’s Gospel, resisted the arrest and struck out with his weapon, cutting off part of Malchus’s ear. Jesus restored the ear, then told his disciples not to resist and left with the crowd as they went back to Jerusalem.



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Jesus. Although he was being arrested, Jesus was clearly in command of the situation.

Peter. Frightened by the crowd, Peter drew a weapon and struck one of the mob that had come to take Jesus away.

Malchus. As an important official of the Jewish high priest, Malchus was probably in charge of the detail which had come to bring Jesus in for trial. He was accompanied by a mob carrying torches and weapons.

How the story unfolds. Jesus had finished a time of prayer and returned to his disciples when a mob led by Judas appeared. Judas pointed out Jesus. As the mob surged forward to seize him, Peter drew a weapon and struck at the group. He cut off part of the ear of the servant of the high priest, whom John identified as Malchus.

Jesus told Peter to put his sword back in its place. Jesus could have called legions of angels to defend him. But the Scriptures had to be fulfilled, so it was necessary that he be taken away.

“Drew his sword” (Matthew 26:51). The word for “sword” and “knife” are the same in Greek, so we can’t be sure what kind of weapon Peter drew. It is clear that he attacked the crowd with it in an attempt to defend Jesus.

“Cut off his ear” (26:51). Mark uses the diminutive Greek word *otarium* for ear, suggesting that perhaps only the ear lobe was cut off. This would explain why [Luke 22:51](#) indicates that Jesus healed the ear rather than reattaching it. In any case, this was a gracious miracle which he performed for an enemy.

“Put your sword in its place” (26:52). [Luke 22:38](#) indicates the disciples had two swords, and [22:49](#) points out that other disciples were only awaiting Jesus’ word to fight back. But Peter didn’t wait for Jesus’ command; he drew his weapon and struck! This was so like Peter.

Pacifists have argued for nonresistance from this passage, while their opponents have noted that Jesus told Peter to put his sword back, not throw it away. But this account of Jesus’ capture is hardly one on which to base arguments over pacifism. Jesus himself said he could have called on legions of angels to fight for him, if this had been God’s will.

Christ allowed himself to be taken so “the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus” ([Matt. 26:54](#)).

The meaning of the miracle. This last miracle, taking place just before Jesus was arrested and sentenced to death, is a striking reminder. Christ was not *forced* to the cross. He was never overpowered by his opponents. He could have escaped the fate they intended for him at any time.

Jesus’ last miracle was actually a warning to his accusers, who refused to believe his claims to be the Christ—in spite of the evidence of his signs and wonders. As Jesus warned them during his trial, “I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” ([Matt. 26:64](#)).

Those who refuse to accept healing at Jesus’ hand will surely face his judgment.

WONDERS AT CALVARY

Jesus performed no miracle while on the cross, but his death was accompanied by wonders.

It is appropriate to note several wonders associated with the death of Jesus on the cross. These, like his miracles, were extraordinary events with a religious purpose caused by God.

The cross is one focus of fulfilled prophecy. It is a wonder indeed that hundreds of years before Jesus came to earth, his crucifixion was described in great detail.

[Psalm 22](#) was acknowledged to be messianic long before Christ was born. It contains the following verses:

“My God, My God, why have

You forsaken Me” ([22:1](#)).

They shoot out the lip, they shake
the head, saying,

“He trusted in the LORD, let Him
rescue Him;

Let Him deliver Him, since He
delights in Him” ([22:7, 8](#)).

They pierced My hands and My feet ([22:16](#)).

They divide My garments among them,

And for My clothing they cast lots ([22:18](#)).



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As we read the Gospels, we discover that each of these verses describes something that was said or something that happened at Calvary.

[Isaiah 53](#) describes Jesus' death in the company of criminals ([Isa. 53:9, 12](#)), predicting that he would be buried in a rich man's tomb ([Isa. 53:9](#)). [Psalm 34:20](#) predicts that none of Jesus' bones would be broken. This is a striking prediction, for the legs of the thieves with whom he died were broken to hasten their deaths ([John 19:32, 33](#)).

These and other prophecies fulfilled at Calvary on the day Jesus died are one of the wonders of God's Word. They remind us that the Cross was always a central element in God's plan and that the death of Jesus was decreed by the Father, not by human beings.

To find the meaning of the Cross, we must understand it not as a tragedy, but as the key to God's triumph over Satan, sin, and death.

The wonder of the torn veil. Matthew reports that at the moment of Jesus' death the veil of the temple was "torn in two from top to bottom" ([Matt. 27:51](#)). The same event is reported in [Mark 15:38](#) and [Luke 23:45](#).



The veil that hung between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies in the temple was a thick, woven tapestry of multiple colored strands. No known force could rip it apart.

The veil was also spiritually significant. Only once a year could the high priest go behind this veil—and then he carried sacrificial blood to sprinkle on the cover of the sacred ark of the covenant as an atonement for Israel's sins.

The writer of the book of Hebrews reveals that the veil which separated the two inner rooms of the temple indicated that "the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest" ([Heb. 9:8](#)). The veil cut off not only the people but even the priests from direct access to God. It was a symbol of the reality that no avenue of approach to God existed in Old Testament times.

But with the death of Christ, a radical change took place. He took our sins upon himself and opened the way to God through his sacrifice. And so the writer of Hebrews declares, "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" ([Heb. 4:16](#)).

The wonder of the torn veil symbolizes the end of one age and the beginning of another. In this new age, all believers can enter the holiest of all boldly and with confidence, knowing that God's throne is a throne of grace for all.

The wonder of the opened graves ([Matt. 27:52, 53](#)). Matthew alone reports this extraordinary event. He indicates that an earthquake struck the area at the moment of Jesus' death, opening a number of graves. Many of the saints were restored to life and seen in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection.

The implications of this wonder are clear. Jesus' death brought life to some who had been dead. What a symbol of victory over death, and of the resurrection life that Jesus offers to all who trust him as Savior.

EASTER MIRACLES—AND BEYOND

Each Gospel devotes much of its space to the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Yet each Gospel account ends on a note of triumph. Jesus has been falsely accused and foully murdered. Yet death cannot hold Jesus. In an unmatched exercise of the power of God, Jesus is raised from the dead!

The account of events on and beyond the first Easter focus our attention on a number of wonders associated with the Resurrection, which is the greatest wonder of all. As we look first at the associated wonders and then at the Resurrection itself, we realize how utterly central the bodily resurrection of our Lord is to authentic Christian faith.

WONDERS ASSOCIATED WITH THE RESURRECTION

The tomb's stone seal was rolled away ([Matt. 28:2](#); [Mark 16:1-3](#); [Luke 24:1-2](#)). The tombs of wealthy first century Jews like Joseph of Arimathea, where Jesus' body was placed, were hewn into rock cliffs. Such tombs generally had several niches carved into the rock, where the bones of several generations of the family could be stored. These tombs were sealed by large stone "wheels," which would be rolled along a track cut into the rock to seal the tomb. When on the first Easter morning several women set out for Jesus' tomb to wrap His body in linen strips interwoven with sweet-smelling spices, they worried. How could they roll away the heavy stone that sealed the tomb?



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When they arrived at the tomb, they discovered the tomb already opened! Matthew tells us that an earthquake had jolted the stone from its track, and an angel had moved it away from the tomb's opening!

The guard posted at the tomb was unconscious ([Matt. 28:4](#)). The Jewish leaders had asked Pilate, the Roman governor, to put a military guard at the tomb. They remembered that Jesus had promised a return to life, and while they did not believe Him, they thought His disciples might try to steal the body.

But the appearance of the angel and the earthquake shocked the military guard into unconsciousness. Later, when they awakened, some of the guard reported what had happened to the chief priests. These religious leaders who had conspired to see Jesus executed then bribed the soldiers with "a large sum of money" to say that the disciples stole Jesus' body while they were asleep.

The leaders must also have promised the soldiers protection, for the penalty for a Roman soldier who slept while on guard was death. And, of course, if the disciples had actually stolen Christ's body while the soldiers slept, the soldiers could hardly have been credible witnesses. How would they know *what* happened, if they were asleep? Like most political cover-ups, this attempt to confuse the population about Christ's resurrection was destined to fail.

Angels informed visitors to the tomb that Jesus had risen from the dead ([Matthew 28:3](#); [Luke 24:4-7](#); [John 20:12-13](#)). This is a third wonder associated with the Resurrection. One or more angels appeared to groups of women who came to the tomb, and testified to Jesus' resurrection. In each case the angels appeared in their natural, radiant state, rather than as ordinary persons. There could be no mistaking the supernatural character of these witnesses to the raising of Jesus.

The undisturbed graveclothes ([John 20:2-10](#)). When Peter and John heard that Jesus' tomb was empty they ran to see for themselves. Peter stooped and stepped into the tomb and was stunned by what he saw.

In biblical times bodies were loosely wrapped in strips of linen, and a cloth was placed over the head of the deceased. What Peter saw was the cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped, still in the shape of the body around which they had been done up! But there was no body inside! Jesus had somehow passed through the grave cloths, leaving them as an empty husk!

The apostle John tells us that when he saw this, he believed ([John 20:8](#))!

Mary saw Jesus Himself ([John 20:12-18](#)). Even after Mary had seen the angels at the tomb, she wept uncontrollably. She was still convinced that "they" had taken Jesus away.

Then through her tears Mary saw a figure standing nearby. Supposing him to be the gardener she asked the figure where the body of Jesus had been placed. Jesus then spoke only one word to Mary: her name. Immediately Mary recognized His voice.

Jesus appeared unrecognized to two disciples on the Emmaus road ([Luke 24:13-35](#)). Another striking incident is reported in Luke. As two disciples return to their home in Emmaus from Jerusalem they are joined by an unknown man. The man questions them, and when they share their vanished hopes that Jesus might have been the Christ, the man leads them through the Old Testament prophets, showing from Scripture that it was foretold that the Christ would suffer as Jesus had!

On arriving home the two travelers invited the stranger to take a meal with them. As the stranger broke the bread and gave thanks for it, in the traditional Jewish table blessing, they suddenly realized that their companion was Jesus Himself, raised from the dead. Jesus then disappeared, and the two hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples that Jesus was alive.

Jesus appeared in a locked room ([Luke 24:36-43](#); [Mark 16:14](#)). The text tells us that Jesus came to His disciples and spoke with them personally shortly after the Resurrection. Luke adds a fascinating detail. The room where the disciples had gathered was a locked room, where the disciples were hiding for fear of the religious leaders who had manipulated Jesus' death.

The sudden appearance of Jesus in the room is one of the proofs that the resurrection body is not limited in the way our mortal bodies are limited. Jesus appeared and disappeared at will, most likely freely crossing the barrier between the material and spiritual universes which no mortal can cross.

Jesus' resurrection body bore the marks of crucifixion in its hands and side ([John 20:24-31](#)). The disciple Thomas had not been present the first time Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples. He would not believe the report of the others that Christ had shown Himself to them, alive. Thomas bluntly stated that he would not believe unless



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he touched Jesus' hands and side, and confirmed that the One who now lived was indeed the same One who had been crucified.

Yet when Jesus did appear, and invited Thomas to touch His wounds, Thomas found he did not need this confirmation after all. Thomas knew Jesus, and fell down before him, confessing "My Lord and my God."

These events, each closely linked to that first Easter morning, were wonders indeed. Yet they pale in comparison to the event with which they are associated: the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION: [Romans 1:4](#);
[1 Corinthians 15](#)

Some contemporary "theologians" have argued that it doesn't matter whether the resurrection of Jesus was literal and historical or not. They claim that a "spiritual" resurrection is all that is required. What mattered is not whether or not Jesus' body was raised and transformed. What mattered is that the disciples *believed* that Jesus was raised. What mattered is that they experienced Him in a different way than when He lived among them.

But the Bible makes it very clear that the resurrection of Jesus was a literal resurrection of the material body, and that the Resurrection took place in space and time as a true historical event. [Romans 1:4](#) reminds us that by His resurrection Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God with power." The Resurrection is the capstone miracle, which confirms once and forever Jesus' claim to be God the Son and Son of God.

The apostle Paul provides a thorough discussion of the Resurrection in chapter [15](#) of his first letter to the Corinthians. Tracing that discussion we gain some insight into both the nature of Jesus' resurrection, and its significance to our faith.

Christ's death, burial, and resurrection are all historical events prophesied in the Old Testament ([1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#)). This is significant, as prophecy which has been fulfilled has invariably been fulfilled literally. We can conclude from this that the death of Jesus was a real death, and the resurrection of Jesus was a real, historical resurrection.

Christ was seen alive after His resurrection by many witnesses who knew Him, and who could not have been deceived ([1 Corinthians 15:5-11](#)). Paul not only mentions the Twelve, but also some 500 others, most of whom were alive when Paul wrote the Corinthian letter.

Christ's was raised as the first of many ([1 Corinthians 15:12-20](#)). Christian faith promises resurrection to all who believe in Jesus. If Christ was not raised, this critical promise is an empty one. On the other hand, because Jesus did experience a bodily resurrection, our own future resurrection is assured.

The Resurrection is a critical element in God's eternal plan to destroy death itself ([1 Corinthians 15:21-28](#)). Adam's sin introduced death. Biblically "death" is not only the cessation of biological life; it is also that corruption of human moral nature which separates human beings from God and brings them under divine judgment. In dying Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. In His resurrection Jesus provided eternal life for those who believe in Him. When God's plan reaches its culmination believers will be resurrected also, and the last taint of sin and death will be forever done away.

The dynamic power of Jesus' resurrection life will accomplish the resurrection transformation of believers, that once again God may be all in all.

While mortal and resurrection bodies are related, the resurrection body is of a different order ([1 Corinthians 15:35-48](#)). The great apostle struggles to find analogies that will help us understand resurrection. In a real sense, we will never understand the glorious prospect God holds up to us until the final resurrection comes. Yet Paul does suggest a series of contrasts which helps us sense something of the transformation that took place when Christ was raised, and that will take place when we are raised from the dead.

Corruption vs. incorruption ([1 Cor. 15:42](#)). The natural body is subject to dissolution. The resurrection body is not.

Dishonor vs. glory ([1 Cor. 15:43](#)). The contrast is explained in the verse. Our natural body is weak and subject to all sorts of disabilities. The resurrection body is infused with power.

Natural body vs. spiritual body ([1 Cor. 15:44](#)). This contrast points out that our mortal body is governed by principles implicit in the material universe. In contrast, the resurrection body operates on principles that are supernatural, i.e., "spiritual."



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Earthly source vs. heavenly source ([1 Cor. 15:47-49](#)). The first man, Adam, was molded from the earth, and his material body was infused with life by God. But Christ's origin is heaven itself, as is the origin of the transformation that produced His resurrection body. In the same sense the essence and origin of our resurrection bodies will be heavenly. In the resurrection "we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man."

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is most certainly one of the three Grand Miracles of our faith, as described on pages 15 through 17 of this book. The literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus also serves as a miraculous confirmation of our own destiny, and as such is foundational to authentic Christian faith.

JESUS CAUSES A GREAT CATCH OF FISH [John 21:1-14](#)

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples by the Sea of Galilee and caused a great catch of fish.

Background of the miracle. This is the second miraculous catch of fish reported in the Gospels. The first was associated with the calling of the disciples as Jesus' followers (see p. 176). This extraordinary catch of fish is related to the recommissioning of Peter and Jesus' call to "follow Me."

Parties to the miracle. The parties to this miracle were the resurrected Jesus and his disciples, with the focus on Peter.

Jesus. This was the third time the disciples had seen Jesus following his resurrection. The other two took place in Jerusalem. This appearance was by the Sea of Galilee.

Peter. Back in Galilee, Peter took the lead and announced that he was going fishing ([John 21:3](#)). A man of action, Peter may have been unable to wait patiently for Jesus to come to them (see [Matt. 28:7](#)). Peter must have been uneasy as well. On the night before Jesus was crucified, Peter had denied the Lord three times.

Peter was so eager to see the Lord that he leaped into the water and swam to shore when Jesus appeared. Then he lingered behind to drag the full nets ashore and count the catch.

After a shared meal on the shore, Jesus spoke to Peter, asking three times about Peter's love for him. After each response, Peter was told to tend or feed Christ's sheep. Peter was thus recommissioned for the ministry to which all the disciples had been called.

But the spiritual significance of this miracle is not Christ's dialogue with his disciple. It is found in a miracle within the miracle.

How the story unfolds. The disciples had returned to Galilee. Peter announced he was going fishing, and the others went with him. Although they fished all night, they caught nothing.

Then as morning dawned, a person was seen on the shore. The figure called to them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. When the fishermen obeyed, they caught a school of large fish so heavy it could not be pulled into the boat.

At this point, John said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" ([John 21:7](#)). Peter grabbed his outer garment and leaped into the sea to swim to shore. The other disciples brought the boat into the shallows, dragging the heavy net. When they reached the shore, they saw that Jesus had a fire going, with bread and fish already laid on the fire.

Jesus instructed them to bring some of the fish they had just caught. The net was pulled on shore and the catch counted. They had caught 153 large fish. Christ called them to the meal, serving them the bread and fish he had prepared.

After this meal, the dialog with Peter occurred.

"They caught nothing" ([John 21:3](#)). The disciples were professional fishermen. But this night their best efforts were futile.

"Cast the net on the right side" ([21:6](#)). Some interpreters have suggested that Jesus could see from the shore the school of fish that the disciples could not. Given the conditions, and the fact that Christ himself was only an indistinct figure in the dawning light, this theory is as absurd as it is unnecessary.

Before his resurrection, Jesus had directed the path of fish in the seas (page 176). He was surely able to cause this school of fish to swim into the net of his disciples.



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“A fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread” (21:9). This is a miracle within the miracle. Jesus caused the disciples to catch fish. But before they brought their catch ashore, he was already preparing fish for them to eat—fish they had not caught, fish which Jesus obtained and prepared for his followers.

The significance of the miracle. The meaning of the miracle lies in three verses that speak of fish.

[John 21:3](#) indicates the disciples caught no fish. Their best efforts were futile, even though they were expert fishermen.

[John 21:6](#) reveals that by following Jesus’ instructions they caught a “multitude of fish.”

[John 21:9](#) tells us that while the disciples were still out on the lake, Jesus was already preparing for them fish which they had not caught.

As the disciples set out on their mission to spread the gospel of the risen Christ, they left their old occupations. However skilled they were at these jobs, there was nothing more in them for persons called to guide Christ’s church.

Jesus’ instructions to the disciples to cast their nets in the path of a school of fish remind us that Christ is able to make us successful in any chosen pursuit, as long as we are obedient to him.

The meal Jesus served the disciples was a promise that they could rely on him to supply all their needs as they carried out their mission. This miracle within a miracle—Jesus’ supply of fish which the disciples did not catch—was the most significant miracle of the two.

Both miracles speak to us today. We learn from one that our success depends on living by Christ’s Word. And we learn from the other that we are free to obey him completely. We can rely on his ability to meet our every need.

CHAPTER 12

◆

MIRACLES OF THE APOSTLES

PROVING CHRIST’S POWER

Acts

- [AN IMPRESSIVE LIST OF MIRACLES](#)
- [JESUS’ MIRACLE RETURN TO HEAVEN \(LUKE 24:50-51; ACTS 1:9-11\)](#)
- [MIRACLE HEALINGS CONTINUE \(ACTS 3:1-26\)](#)
- [SAUL’S MIRACLE CONVERSION \(ACTS 9:1-20\)](#)
- [MIRACLES AT PHILIPPI \(ACTS 16:16-40\)](#)
- [THE MEANING OF MIRACLES IN ACTS](#)

Jesus was gone. He had been raised from the dead, but within a few days Jesus returned to heaven. With Jesus gone, would miracles cease?

The answer of the book of Acts is, “No!” Even from heaven Jesus continued to perform miracles through His followers. Miracles performed by the apostles provided proof of their claim that Jesus is Lord, and proof that the power of Jesus is unlimited still!

MIRACLE CLUSTERS IN SCRIPTURE

As noted earlier, Scripture records several periods during which clusters of miracles took place. Typically these periods were marked by establishing miracles, which served to underline some great new revelation.

Thus, the ten great miracle plagues in Egypt, associated with the name Yahweh, demonstrated that the Lord was God, and that he was faithful to the covenant promises given earlier to Abraham. These miracles also established Moses as God’s representative, who would unveil the next stage in God’s eternal plan.



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In a similar way, the next cluster of miracles, performed by Elijah in the eighth century B.C., were establishing miracles. King Ahab had launched an intensive campaign to make Baal worship the official religion of Israel. God's historic and written revelation were under direct attack. The miracles performed by Elijah, and particularly the miracle on Mount Carmel, demonstrated conclusively that the Lord is God, turning the tide against the advocates of Baal.

Each of these two clusters of establishing miracles was followed by a series of supportive miracles. The supportive miracles showed the continuing presence of the Lord, further confirming the revelation authenticated by the establishing miracles.

During the Exodus a number of miracles served this purpose, and miracles continued on through the time of the conquest of Canaan. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would occupy Canaan. The ten plagues established the Lord as God, and the later miracles revealed his continuing presence with his covenant people.

In the eighth century the miracles of Elijah again established that the Lord alone is God. The supporting miracles of Elijah's successor, Elisha, revealed the continuing presence of the Lord with his people, who had returned to him.

THE MIRACLES OF JESUS AND THE APOSTLES

The miracles of Jesus clearly fit the pattern and purpose of earlier clusters of miracles. A new aspect of God's eternal plan was being unveiled. The miracles of Jesus were establishing miracles. They proved that Jesus was God's spokesman as well as the promised Messiah.

Earlier miracles had proven that the Lord is God. Christ's miracles, and especially the Resurrection, proved that Jesus was the Lord.

But Christ had died and been raised, and had returned to heaven. So the question might well be raised, How could the presence of the risen Jesus be proven by those who set out on the new path that Jesus had revealed? In the past, establishing miracles had been followed by supporting miracles. It was the same with Jesus' miracles. The early days of the Christian church were marked by wonders and miracles performed by the apostles. As supporting miracles, these demonstrated the presence of Jesus with his followers, authenticating the movement Jesus founded as a work of God.

SUPPORTING MIRACLES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

The book of Acts includes reports of 14 distinct wonders or miracles and references to others. The distinct wonders and miracles are:

1. Jesus' ascension
2. Pentecost
3. Healing of a lame man
4. Death of Ananias and Sapphira
5. Opening of prison doors
6. Saul's conversion
7. Peter's restoration of Dorcas
- 8.-9. Peter's deliverance from prison and Herod's death
10. Paul's blinding of Elymas
11. Paul's healing of a cripple at Lystra
12. Casting out a demon in Philippi
13. Paul's restoration of Eutychus
14. Paul's healing of Publius's father

GENERAL REFERENCES TO MIRACLES IN ACTS

Many passages in Acts reveal that miracles, wonders, and signs accompanied the ministry of the apostles and others as the Christian church was established in Jerusalem, spread through Judea and Samaria, and ultimately radiated out into the wider Roman world.

We can sense how common miracles and wonders were in these early days by looking at the verses which give general descriptions of miracles during this period.



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Then fear came upon every soul [in Jerusalem], and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles (Acts 2:43).

After being ordered to stop preaching, the apostles prayed,

“Look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29, 30).

And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people (Acts 5:12).

They brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed (Acts 5:15, 16).

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8).

And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed (Acts 8:6, 7).

Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done (Acts 8:13).

Therefore they stayed there a long time [in Iconium], speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands (Acts 14:3).

Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12).

God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them (Acts 19:11).

These were indeed supportive miracles, performed in Jesus’ name. They made it plain to all that God was with these followers who proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God. The new revelation introduced and established by the miracle-working Christ was further confirmed by a great number of supportive miracles performed by his followers.

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS Acts 1:9–11

The Ascension was Jesus’ return to heaven, mentioned three times by Luke in his Gospel and Acts: Luke 24:50–51; Acts 1:2; and Acts 1:9–11. As the disciples watched in wonder, two angels joined them, promising that Jesus would come back “in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.”

Jesus was taken up and received into a cloud (Acts 1:9). The miraculous departure of Christ contrasts with the Old Testament’s report of Elijah’s departure. That Old Testament prophet was swept up into heaven by angels, carried away in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11).

The description of Jesus’ departure seems almost casual. One moment the resurrected Christ was blessing his disciples outside Bethany (Luke 24:51). And the next, he was taken up into the air and received into a cloud.

However, this departure was less casual than the description suggests. When associated with the miraculous, clouds have a special significance.

We’re reminded of Luke 9, which describes Jesus’ transfiguration in front of some of his disciples. Luke indicated that a cloud “overshadowed them” and that a voice speaking from the cloud announced, “This is My Beloved Son, hear him!” (Luke 9:34, 35). The cloud also reminds us of Jesus’ words about himself and his return, “in the clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26).

In each case, the image of the cloud is rooted in the Old Testament era, where a bright cloud symbolized the glory of God, the *shekinah*, which once filled the tabernacle and later filled the temple built by Solomon.

Thus, the apostles’ last glimpse of Jesus was of him being enveloped in a cloud which spoke of the divine presence. Even the manner in which Jesus was taken up was a powerful affirmation of his divinity.



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Jesus was carried up “into heaven.” The Greek phrase *eis ton ouranon*, “into heaven,” is used in Luke 24:51 and repeated in Acts 1:10 and three times in Acts 1:11. It is clear that locating the risen Jesus in heaven was of central importance to Luke in reporting this wonder.

The message of the two angels further emphasizes this point. The angels told the watchers that “this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). The angels’ words established two things: Jesus was now in heaven and Jesus would return to earth.

The continuing emphasis on Jesus’ location “in heaven” is the most significant feature of this first wonder described in the book of Acts.

Why Jesus’ presence in heaven was so significant. The importance of establishing this point is reflected in a prayer offered by the apostles after a confrontation with the leaders who had conspired to have Jesus executed. The disciples prayed that the Lord would stretch out his hand to heal, and that signs and wonders might be done through the name of Jesus (Acts 4:30). Because he was in heaven, Jesus could now answer his disciples’ prayers and act through them to perform fresh wonders on the earth!

In fact, the New Testament mentions a number of the present ministries of Jesus Christ.

- Jesus in heaven is preparing a place for us (John 14:2, 3).
- Jesus, as the vine, is the source of that spiritual vitality which enables us to bear fruit as we stay close to him (John 15:4, 5).
- Jesus, as head of the church, guides and directs us (Eph. 2:20, 21).
- Jesus, as our High Priest, sympathizes with our weaknesses and provides mercy and enabling grace when we come to his throne of grace (Heb. 4:15, 16).
- Jesus, as our High Priest, intercedes for us, guaranteeing our salvation (Heb. 7:25).
- Jesus, as our advocate, represents us when we sin, pledging his own blood as the basis for our salvation (1 John 2:1, 2).

These and other ministries which Jesus performs for believers today make his living presence in heaven vital for us. And the wonder of the Ascension focuses our attention on the fact that Jesus lives, and that in heaven today he ministers to us and our needs.⁵

Miracle

Greek expression: *dunamis*

Pronunciation: *DOO nah meess*

Strong’s Number: 1411

KEY VERSES

Mark 6:2, 5, 14; Acts 8:13

“It’s a miracle!” Of course, reports of miracles span from, “It’s a miracle that my car started,” to “It’s a miracle that I didn’t die when I was hit by that car.”

According to the Bible, a miracle is a divine act. Through miracles, God reveals His power to people on the earth. The Greek word for “miracle”—*dunamis*, literally meaning “power”—indicates that a miracle is an act of God’s power. Miracles often defy, or overpower, natural law—but not always. God can also use nature to perform a miracle. For example, God used the wind to part the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21).

The greatest miracle is that the Son of God became mortal and then overcame mortality, death itself, through the resurrection. In between these events, while on earth, Jesus performed miracles, especially exorcisms—the casting out of demons. The exorcisms demonstrated that Jesus Christ was binding the forces of evil and instituting the reign of God (Mark 3:23–27). Jesus’ miracles signified the dawning of the age of salvation (Luke 4:18–21). Yet, these miracles were not irrefutable evidence of God’s actions. They had to be interpreted through the eyes of faith.

⁵ Richards, L. (1998). [Every miracle in the Bible](#) (pp. 246–249). Nashville: T. Nelson.



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Jesus was well aware of the presence of other miracles in His day (Matt. 12:27) and so stressed the presence of faith when He healed (Mark 5:32; 10:52). A person's faith had to be directed towards Jesus Himself.

Among the four Gospels, Mark records the most miracles. The first of the five groups of miracles in Mark centers on Jesus' authority over demons (Mark 1:21–29). The second concerns Jesus' authority over the Law and the conflict with the religious leaders (Mark 1:40–3:6). The third group contains exorcisms and the Beelzebub controversy, centering around Christ's power over Satan (Mark 3:7–30). The fourth group contains especially powerful miracles, such as Jesus' stilling of a storm, His exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac, and the raising of Jairus' daughter. It is through these miracles that Jesus reveals the power of God's kingdom to His disciples and seeks to overcome their spiritual dullness. The fifth and final group of miracles prepares the disciples for Jesus' crucifixion (Mark 6:30–8:26).

The miracles in Mark center on conflict—first with Jesus' opponents and then with His own disciples. While they are harbingers of God's kingdom, their purpose is to challenge people with God's awesome power. They do not show Jesus as a "wonder worker"—in fact, miracles lead only to amazement or disbelief in those who don't believe. Jesus can only be understood in light of His death on the cross. The miracles are not proofs, but powers—God does not authenticate Himself through them, but shows Himself to those with eyes to see. Even as the apostles and other Christians have continued to perform miracles, they always point to God and glorify Him.⁶

MIRACLE (δύναμις, *dynamis*). An event that defies common expectations of behavior and subsequently is attributed to a superhuman agent; an occurrence that demonstrates God's involvement in the course of human affairs.

Biblical Relevance

Miracles can be characterized by four means:

1. form of the miracle;
2. identity of the direct agent (actor ultimately responsible for the miracle);
3. presence or absence of an intermediate agent;
4. observers' responses.

These means of characterization are interrelated. For example, Jesus of Nazareth's confirmation as the intermediary for the Gospels' miracles affects the theological functions of the miracles.

Miracles in the Hebrew Bible

The Old Testament designates certain extraordinary phenomena as "signs" and "wonders" demonstrating divine power. Forms of miracles in the Old Testament include:

- celestial events (e.g., Josh 10:9–15);
- instantaneous healings (e.g., 2 Kgs 5:14);
- control of nature (e.g., Exod 14:21–22);
- objects and animals acting in unexpected ways (e.g., Num 22:22–35; 2 Kgs 6:5–7).

The Hebrew Bible frequently portrays God as the direct agent of miracles in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Numbers 22:22–35 explicitly attributes responsibility for a miracle to God, stating that "the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey" so that it talked to Balaam (Num 22:28 NRSV). He often employs a human intermediary (e.g., Moses in Exod 14:21). Sometimes His power is so essential to a human character that the division between God's power and the power inherent in the human character is hardly recognizable (e.g., 2 Kgs 1:15; 2 Kgs 6:5–7; Lindars, "Elijah, Elisha and Gospel Miracles," 62–79).

Human responses to miracles depend on the observer's personal situation, sociopolitical situation, and theological suppositions. Thus, the same miraculous event can elicit different responses among various observers. For example, while Belshazzar's initial response to the mysterious hand's writing on the wall is fear, Daniel shows

⁶ Carpenter, E. E., & Comfort, P. W. (2000). In *Holman treasury of key Bible words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew words defined and explained* (p. 336). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.



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no fear (Dan 5:6, 17–28). In addition, a miracle usually affects the reputation of its agent(s). The Philistines of 1 Sam 4:8, for instance, are fearful of the Hebrew “gods” who afflicted the Egyptians with plagues (Exod 7–12; Stirrup, “Why Has Yahweh Defeated Us?” 89–90).

Miracles in the New Testament

New Testament miracles occupy a central place within narrative texts (the Gospels and Acts) and apocalyptic texts (Revelation and Mark 13), and they often occur through human intermediaries. The most significant intermediary in the New Testament is Jesus, who performs miracles of healing, provision of food, and control of nature.

New Testament miracles display God’s power, confirming or demonstrating the gospel message.

- Mark’s Gospel treats miracles as symbolic demonstrations of the kingdom of God rather than validations of Jesus and the gospel (Glasswell, “Miracles in Mark,” 154–62; Robbins, “*Dynameis* and *Semeia*,” 19; compare Saucy, “Miracles and Proclamation,” 281–307).
- Matthew’s Gospel uses miracles to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise to raise up a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:18; Baxter, “Mosaic Imagery,” 76).
- Luke’s Gospel and Acts refer to the miracles of Jesus and the early Christ-followers as validating signs and wonders (e.g., Acts 2:43; Achtemeier, “Lucan Perspective,” 553–56; Lampe, “Miracles in Acts,” 165). Miracles in Acts work within a mutually interpretative relationship with the Gospel message (Marguerat, “Magic and Miracle in Acts,” 124).
- John’s Gospel describes Jesus’ miracles as explanatory signs (σημεῖα, *sēmeia*); the text never calls them “miracles” (δύναμεις, *dynameis*; Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic*, 88).
- Miraculous signs and wonders are confirmations of Paul’s apostleship and valuable evangelistic tools (Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12). Paul considers the ability to perform miracles a spiritual gift (1 Cor 12:10, 28–29).

Throughout the New Testament, enemies of the Christ-movement are capable of performing miraculous signs and wonders:

- Mark 13:22 and Matt 24:24 attribute signs and wonders to “false Christs” and “false prophets” (Glasswell, “Miracles in Mark,” 155).
- 2 Thessalonians 2:9 indicates that the “man of lawlessness” will perform signs and wonders to deceive Christ-followers.
- Revelation refers to signs and wonders as both heavenly visions and as instruments of Satan’s forces (Rev 12:1, 3; 13:13–14; 15:1; 19:20; Aune, *Prophecy*, 281; Aune, “Intertextual Reading,” 130, 138).

Functions of Biblical Miracles

The function(s) of a miracle can be identified by several categories, including:

- instrumental—such as the heavenly manna (Exod 16:11–21), which serves to provide nourishment for the Israelites;
- communicative—for example, the hand that writes on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace (Dan 5; Collins, *Daniel*, 250);
- punitive—like the tumors that afflict the Philistines while they possess the ark of the covenant (1 Sam 5:6–12; Culley, “Themes and Variations,” 9);
- sociopolitical—as when God confirms that Elijah is the superior prophet by sending fire from the sky to consume his water-soaked offering (1 Kgs 18; compare Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 231–64);
- theological—which can be divided further into four primary functions:
 - validation of God—for example, the consumption of Elijah’s offering (1 Kgs 18) validates the superiority of the Hebrew God over Baal and questions Baal’s existence, and the heavenly voice and descending Spirit at Jesus’ baptism confirm His status as God’s Son (Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic*, 80, 86);



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- validation of God's message—such as Moses' miracles before Pharaoh (Exod 7–12; Woods, “Evidential Value of Miracles,” 21–22);
- signal of God's activity—such as Jesus' miracles in Matthew and Mark (Glasswell, “Miracles in Mark,” 154–55);
- divine act of salvation—the miracles in Acts, for example, are themselves saving acts, not just signs of salvation (Lampe, “Miracles in Acts,” 171–78).

Terminology for Miracles

The Hebrew words for “sign” (אֹת, *'wt*) and “wonder” (מוֹפֵת, *mwppt*) frequently refer to miraculous events. While the words typically function as synonyms, a sign explicitly notes the referential quality of a miracle (Simon, “1 Kings 13,” 6; Remus, “Does Terminology Distinguish Miracles?” 537–38). The juxtaposition of “signs” and “wonders” occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exod 7:3; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 34:11; Isa 8:18; Jer 32:20–21; Kee, *Medicine, Miracles and Magic*, 11).

Three words in the New Testament refer to miracles:

- power (δύναμις, *dynamis*)—in certain contexts, “miracle” and “mighty deed” are alternate translations;
- sign (σημεῖον, *sēmeion*)—often refers to a miracle that figuratively represents something else, such as the kingdom of God or the gospel;
- wonder (τέρας, *teras*)—indicates something extraordinary.

The juxtaposition of “signs” (אֹת, *'wt*) and “wonders” (מוֹפֵת, *mptym*) occurs in the New Testament with the combination of the Greek words for “signs and wonders” (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα, *sēmeia kai terata*) (e.g., Mark 13:22; John 4:48; Acts 2:43; Rom 15:19; McCasland, “Signs and Wonders,” 149–52). John refers to Jesus' miracles as works (ἔργα, *erga*; e.g., John 10:20). Another Greek word for “wonder” (θαῦμα, *thauma*) appears outside the New Testament as a reference to miracles. In the New Testament, (θαῦμα, *thauma*) refers to “wonder” in the sense of simple amazement (2 Cor 11:14; Rev 17:6).

The modern term “miracle” derives from the use of *miraculum*, a Latin term for “wonder,” during the late Roman imperial and early medieval periods. Augustine (AD 354–430) first formulated a unified Christian concept of miracle (Harrison, “Miracles, Science, and Religion,” 495–96). The foundations for the Christian concept lie in the New Testament's presentation of the extraordinary deeds performed by Jesus and His followers.

Miracles in Ancient History

Ancient Near Eastern and Greek societies understood miraculous occurrences as evidence of divine and spiritual beings' participation in earthly affairs (McCasland, “Signs and Wonders,” 149–52). Typical ancient Near Eastern and Greek cosmologies reserved an essential role for deities and spiritual beings within the natural order of the world. Although miraculous events were extraordinary, they were not considered contradictions to the natural order (Ross, “Notes on Miracle,” 45–46).

Common miraculous events in ancient society included:

- healings;
- oracles—such as those of the Delphic Pythia and predictions by Hebrew prophets;
- celestial portents—for example, the Star of Bethlehem;
- extraordinary natural events—for example, earthquakes;
- extraordinary performances by recognized “holy persons,” including Empedocles, Jesus, Apollonius of Tyana.

The distinction between “miracle” and “magic” derives from the observer's perspective, which can involve numerous factors, including: group membership; historical context; cultural context; and theological views. In the fifth–fourth centuries BC, many Greeks and Romans came to suspect traditional healers, diviners, prophets, and wonder-workers of being “magicians” (Graf, *Magic*, 26–27, 30–35). The classical and Hellenistic periods of Greek history saw a steep decline in the popularity of traditional Greek oracles, such as the one at Delphi (Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 305–08; Aune, *Prophecy*, 24). Hippocratic medicine, which diagnosed illness as the result of natural and



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physiological causes, grew in popularity. Skepticism toward miracles placed many popular healers and wonder-workers on the defensive against their characterizations as “magicians” (Graf, *Magic*, 232–33). In the Roman imperial period, Christ-followers recognized wonders performed by or through God as “miracles” and commonly characterized all other wonders as “magic” performed by or through the devil. Stratton refers to this as the “Christian magic discourse” (e.g., Acts 8:9–15; 13:6–12; Stratton *Naming the Witch*, 107–41; see also Remus, *Pagan-Christian Conflict*, 48–82; Lampe, “Miracles and Apologetic,” 205–18).

Modern Scholarly Approaches to Miracles

Approaches that focus on the historical and social aspects of miracles presently dominate modern scholarship. Such approaches include the following:

- form and redaction criticisms (e.g., Fortna, “Source and Redaction of Fourth Gospel”; Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 43–228);
- socio-historical studies—a way of understanding biblical miracles within their particular ancient social contexts (e.g., Kee, *Miracle in Early Christianity*);
- social-scientific criticism—studies miracles and magic using the insights, theories, and models of modern social sciences (e.g., Craffert, *Life of a Galilean Shaman*);
- rationalization of miracles—defending the historical authenticity of miracles by explaining how a miracle may have occurred in accordance with modern science; this approach has fallen out of favor (Smith, “Present State of Old Testament Studies,” 20; compare Gruenthaner, “Two Sun Miracles,” 271–90).

As an example of the social-scientific approach, Kee and Klauck are among biblical scholars who label extraordinary deeds performed spontaneously as “miracle” and deeds produced through coercive ritual as “magic” (see Kee, *Medicine, Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times* 3; Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 154–77). This distinction is based upon a characterization of religion as a petitioning ritual and magic as a coercive ritual.

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⁷ Roberts, R. D. (2016). [Miracle](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



When Jesus Speaks: Through His Miracles - Intertestamental Period, Week 1

MIRACLES—historic events or natural phenomena which appear to violate or transcend natural laws but which reveal God to the eye of faith at the same time. A helpful way of understanding the meaning of miracles is to examine the various terms for miracles used in the Bible.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament use the word sign (Is. 7:11, 14; John 2:11) to denote a miracle that points to a deeper revelation. Wonder (Joel 2:30; Mark 13:22) emphasizes the effect of the miracle, causing awe and even terror. A work (Matt. 11:2) points to the presence of God in history, acting for mankind. The New Testament uses the word power (Mark 6:7) to emphasize God's acting in strength. These terms often overlap in meaning (Acts 2:43). They are more specific than the more general term "miracle."

Miracles in the Old Testament. The readers of the Old Testament recognized that God is the Creator and sustainer of all life (Ex. 34:10; Ps. 33:6-7; Is. 40:26). This assumption permitted the Israelites the possibility of miracles. They thought of the world as God's theater for displaying His glory and love (Pss. 33:5; 65:6-13). Thus, the miracle was not so much a proof for God's existence as a revelation to the faithful of God's covenant love.

When God parted the water for the Israelites, or when He saved Israel in Egypt through the Passover, God revealed His character; and the Israelites were convinced that God was working for their salvation (Ex. 12:13-14). Miracles were expressions of God's saving love as well as His holy justice.

Miracles in the Old Testament are connected especially with the great events in Israel's history—the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), the birth of Moses (Ex. 1:1-2:22), the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12:1-14:31), the giving of the Law (Ex. 19:1-20:26), and entry into the Promised Land (Josh. 3:1-4:7). These miracles are for salvation or deliverance, but God also acts in history for judgment (Gen. 11:1-9).

The plagues of the Exodus showed God's sovereign power in judgment and salvation (Ex. 7:3-5). In parting the water, God showed His love and protection for Israel as well as His judgment on Egypt for its failure to recognize God (Ex. 15:2, 4-10). During the wilderness journey, God demonstrated His love and protection in supplying the daily manna (Ex. 16:1-36). Another critical period in Israel's history was the time of Elijah, the champion of Israel. Elijah controlled the rain and successfully challenged the pagan priests of Baal (1 Kin. 17:1; 18:1-40). God revealed Himself as Lord, as Savior of Israel, and as punisher of the nation's enemies.

Miraculous wonders do not appear as frequently during the days of the later prophets. But one unusual miracle was the recovery of Hezekiah (2 Kin. 20:1-21; Is. 38:1-21) as well as the miracles in Jonah and Daniel. Prophecy itself can even be interpreted as a miracle. God revealed Himself during this time through the spoken and written Word.

Miracles in the New Testament. As with the Old Testament, the New Testament miracles are essentially expressions of God's salvation and glory.

Why did Jesus perform miracles? Jesus answered this question Himself. When in prison, John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to Jesus to see if He was the "Coming One" (Matt. 11:3). Jesus told them to inform John of what He had done: "The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (11:5). With these words, Jesus declared that His miracles were the fulfillment of the promises of the Messiah's kingdom as foretold by Isaiah (24:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). Jesus' miracles were signs of the presence of the kingdom of God (Matt. 12:39).

This theme of the miracles pointing to the kingdom of God was developed and deepened especially in the Gospel of John. John presented the miracles of Jesus as "signs" on seven occasions: John 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-18; 6:1-15; 6:16-21; 9:1-41; and 11:1-57. He thought of these miracles as pointing to deep spiritual truth, demanding obedient faith (John 2:11, 23-25). Thus, Jesus' feeding miracle (6:1-15) was Jesus' presentation of Himself as the True Manna, the One who gives life and sustenance.

Jesus also understood His miracles as evidences of the presence of the kingdom in His ministry (Matt. 11:2-5; 12:28). Every miracle story was a sign that God's salvation was present. But not only did the kingdom come; it came in great power, because the dead were raised (Is. 26:19; Luke 7:11-15) and Satan was bound (Mark 3:27).

Jesus' miracles were also performed upon the most unlikely people. Jesus consciously brought the salvation of God to those who were rejected. He healed the lame (Matt. 9:1-8), the dumb (Matt. 9:32-33), and lepers (Luke 17:11-19). Jesus brought the kingdom to all, regardless of their condition.

But Jesus' miracles were not theatrical sensations. He demanded faith of others (Matt. 9:2). The hemorrhaging woman was healed because of her faith (Matt. 9:18-26). Furthermore, Jesus expected the disciples to do miracles and rebuked them for their "little faith" and unbelief (Matt. 17:20).

Jesus' call to trust in Himself led regularly to opposition by Jewish leaders. John drew this out when he recorded Jesus' healing of a man born blind. Jesus' salvation comes even on the Sabbath, overturning Pharisaic



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legalism (John 9:16) and resulting in their blindness (John 9:39-41). Similarly the Pharisees broke into a charge of blasphemy when Jesus healed the paralytic and pronounced him forgiven of sins (Mark 2:1-12). The miracles of Jesus, being God's offer of salvation, demanded a decision. As a result, a division of the Pharisees occurred (Matt. 9:32-34).

Finally, we gain a deeper understanding of Jesus in His miracles. He is Lord over nature (Mark 4:35-41) and death (Luke 8:41-56; John 11:1-44). He is the Suffering Servant who bears the infirmities of others (Matt. 8:16-17). He is the Messiah who was to come (Matt. 11:2-6). He fights the battle against evil (Mark 3:23-30; Luke 11:18-23).

Jesus did not work miracles to prove His deity or His messiahship. In fact, He clearly refused to work miracles as proofs (Matt. 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-32). His death was the proof to Israel. However, Jesus' miracles do give evidence that He was the Son of God, the Messiah.

The Acts of the Apostles is a book of miracles. Again, these miracles are a continuation of the miracles of Jesus, made possible through the Holy Spirit. The miracles of the apostles were done in the name of Jesus and were manifestations of God's salvation (Acts 3:11). This thread of continuity is seen in Peter's miracles which paralleled those of Jesus (Luke 7:22; 5:18-26; 8:49-56; Acts 3:1-16; 9:32-35, 36-42).

God began His church with a powerful display of miracles. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came on the people with great power (Acts 2:1-13), leading to conversions (Acts 2:41). When Philip went to Samaria, the Spirit of God anointed him with power (Acts 8:4-40), and the same happened with Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48). These powerful wonders were designed to convince the apostles and the Palestinian church that other cultures were to be part of the church. To these were added the stunning act of God through Peter when Ananias and Sapphira acted in hypocrisy (Acts 4:32-5:11), the church's power in prayer (Acts 4:23-31), and Paul's transforming vision (Acts 16:6-10).

Miraculous powers were also present in the apostles. Peter healed a lame man (Acts 3:1-6), a paralytic (Acts 9:32-35), and raised the dead (Acts 9:36-42). The apostles performed mighty miracles (Acts 5:12-16), and Peter was miraculously released from prison (Acts 12:1-11). Paul's conversion was a startling incident (Acts 9:1-19). Ability to work miracles was taken as a sign for apostleship by Paul (Rom. 15:18-19; 2 Cor. 12:12). Thus, this ability to work miracles is not only an expression of God's salvation but also God's way of authenticating His apostles.

The lists of the gifts of the Spirit in the New Testament show miracles were one of the means by which believers ministered to others (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10, 28-30; Eph. 4:11-12). This is sufficient evidence to verify that the working of miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of Jesus Christ is (1) still intended in the church today, and (2) available for ministry through any believer the Spirit may choose to use.⁸

⁸ Hayford, J. W., Thomas Nelson Publishers. (1995). [Hayford's Bible handbook](#). Nashville, TN; Atlanta, GA; London; Vancouver: Thomas Nelson Publishers.



INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

The closing of the Old Testament:

Malachi:

Theological and Ethical Significance. Malachi speaks to the hearts of a troubled people whose circumstances of financial insecurity, religious skepticism, and personal disappointments are similar to those God's people often experience or encounter today. The book contains a message that must not be overlooked by those who wish to encounter the Lord and His kingdom and to lead others to a similar encounter. Its message concerns God's loving and holy character and His unchanging and glorious purposes for His people. Our God calls His people to genuine worship, to fidelity both to Himself and to one another, and to expectant faith in what He is doing and says He will do in this world and for His people.

God's love is paramount. It is expressed in Malachi in terms of God's election and protection of Israel above all the nations of the world. Since God has served the interests of Judah out of His unchanging love, He requires Judah to live up to its obligations by obedience and loyalty to Him and not empty ritualism in worship. This love relationship between God and Judah is the model by which the individual is expected to treat his neighbor; we are bound together as a community created by God, we are responsible for one another, and we are required to be faithful in our dealings with one another at every point in life.

As a community devoted to God, God's people enjoy His protection and intercession. But failure to live right before God and our fellow man means not only the natural consequences of a wicked society but also the intervention of God's judgment. Thus, God's people cannot expect the joy of His blessings if we persist to fail in our duties to God and one another; the people must repent because the judgment of God is certain.

But before God would hold Judah in the balance of judgment, He would grant one last call for repentance; a forerunner would precede that terrible day and herald the coming of God's kingdom in the earth.

Questions for Reflection

1. How can a Christian keep from developing an attitude that displeases God, especially in difficult times?
2. How can we ensure that our worship honors God?
3. How can we ensure that our marriage and family honor God? ⁹

INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

Why study the period between the Testaments? Our Bible skips from Malachi to Matthew. Why should students of the Bible not do the same?

The primary reason for studying this period is that the books of the New Testament were written to speak to people at the time they were written. That they still speak to us is a sign of their inspiration, not an indication of their original purpose.

We live in a different era and thought world from that in which the New Testament was written. In order to be able to appreciate its meaning, we need to immerse ourselves in the world of the New Testament period. Important, world-shaping events occurred in Palestine between the conquests of Alexander (334–323 B.C.) and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 135.

Moreover, Jesus was a first-century Galilean, a Jew. In order to understand aspects of His teachings, we must try to hear Him as first-century Galileans heard Him. Only after we understand the meaning of the New Testament in its original context will we be able to interpret it for our time.

INTERTESTAMENTAL HISTORY

Intertestamental history covers the period between the writing of the final books of the Old and New Testaments. The conquests of Alexander the Great (334 B.C.) and the Bar Kochba Revolt (A.D. 132–135) serve as the outer limits of this period.

Alexander and the Successors

Alexander assumed the Macedonian throne following the assassination of his father, Philip II in 336 B.C. Alexander was twenty, and with Aristotle as his final tutor, he had received the finest education of his day.

⁹ Dockery, D. S. (Ed.). (1992). [Holman Bible Handbook](#) (p. 503). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.



When Jesus Speaks: Through His Miracles - Intertestamental Period, Week 1

At the time of Alexander's rise to power, the Jews were living under the rule of the Persian Empire. Aramaic had become the common language in Palestine. The dispersion of the Jews had already begun. There were significant populations of Jews not only in Babylon and Egypt but also in the major cities of the Mediterranean world also. The numbers of Jews in these cities increased significantly during the period between the Testaments.

Within two years of his coming to the throne, Alexander launched a campaign against the Persian Empire. He would never return to Macedonia. Alexander was a brilliant, resourceful commander. His army was like a traveling city. Under his leadership it won battle after battle in Asia Minor, Phoenicia, Palestine, Egypt, Babylonia, and as far east as the Indus River.

When an officer was wounded, Alexander might appoint him as governor of a city and let him remain there with his family. When an army was overrun, Alexander offered the defeated soldiers the opportunity to fight for him.

As Alexander swept through Palestine in 332, he first took Tyre and then swept down the coast to Gaza. Samaria and Jerusalem offered no resistance. Alexander treated local religions with respect. In Egypt he was even proclaimed as a divine man, the son of their supreme god. Once he had defeated Darius, the Persian ruler, Alexander married Darius's daughter and another royal princess. For Alexander the marriages were a symbol of the union between Macedonia and the Orient.

Alexander's conquests carried with them the spread of Hellenism, Greek culture, and the Greek spirit. Koine Greek became the common language of the eastern Mediterranean. *Koine* means *common* or *profane*. It was not refined, classical Greek but Greek as learned and spoken by those who were not native Greeks. Koine Greek later became the language of the New Testament.

Hellenism emphasized education, physical development, athletic contests, art, sculpture, drama, and philosophy. The theater and the gymnasium were both its landmarks and its legacy. Ironically, some Jews responded to the inroads of Hellenism by establishing a program of universal education. All Hebrew boys would be taught to read the Scriptures in Hebrew. The development of virtue through education, however, was one of the cardinal principles of Hellenism.

A marble head of Antiochus III, "the Great" (223–187 B.C.), found in Syria.

Alexander died suddenly in 323 B.C. shortly after his return to Babylon (see Dan 11:3–4). No one could take his place. Indeed, it is doubtful that Alexander himself could have established an effective administration over all the lands he had conquered. For the next twenty years there were constant wars among his would-be successors (the *diadochoi*). By 301 B.C., after the battle of Ipsus, the territories of Alexander's empire were divided as follows:

1. The Antigonids held Macedonia.
2. The Ptolemies ruled Egypt and Libya.
3. The Seleucids controlled Syria and Persia.

A mosaic found at Pompeii and dating from the first century A.D. which depicts the battle of Issus in 333 B.C. Alexander the Great is on the left of the mosaic battling his way to the chariot of Darius III on the right center.

Palestine was controlled by the Ptolemies from 301 B.C. until the battle of Panium in 198 B.C., when it fell under Seleucid domination.

Under the Ptolemies, Palestine experienced a century of relatively peaceful development. Political independence, self-sufficiency, prominence, and leadership were the dominant motives for the political conduct of the successors. They sought the greatest measure of economic self-sufficiency as a basis for political independence. They established economic and social patterns that continued into the New Testament period. The parables of Jesus—with their large landowners, tenants, stewards, money lenders, day laborers, tax collectors, grain speculation, and land leasing—must be understood against the background of the economic structures developed by the Ptolemies. The land was regarded as the king's possession, and a portion of its produce was paid to the king. Jerusalem became a temple state governed by a high priestly aristocracy.

At the Battle of Panium (later renamed Caesarea Philippi) in 198 B.C., the Seleucids, under the able leadership of Antiochus III the Great, seized Palestine. Apparently the majority of Jews in Palestine were pro-Seleucid at the time. Antiochus needed the goodwill of the Jews because war with Rome was becoming inevitable as Roman domination spread eastward. Antiochus consequently promised the Jews relief from taxes and relative freedom. The transfer of power in Jerusalem must have created strained relations, however, between Jews in Alexandria and Jews in Jerusalem. Alexandrian Jews may well have been regarded with suspicion by the Ptolemies.



When Jesus Speaks: Through His Miracles - Intertestamental Period, Week 1

By 188 B.C. Antiochus was forced to sign a peace treaty with the Romans at Apamea. Under this treaty his son, who would later be Antiochus IV Epiphanes, was sent to Rome as a hostage. Territory was taken from Antiochus, and he agreed to pay Rome fifteen thousand talents over a period of twelve years. In effect, Antiochus III was reduced to the role of tax collector for Rome. He died the next year in a foolish effort to plunder treasure from a temple in Elam.

Under his successor, Seleucus IV (187–175 B.C.), Jewish sympathies for the Egyptian Ptolomies seem to have increased as Seleucus raised taxes. Parties began to form with leanings toward one power or the other. Seleucus sent Heliodorus to plunder the temple in Jerusalem, but he returned saying that he had been prevented from doing so by supernatural beings. Shortly thereafter, Heliodorus murdered Seleucus.

Antiochus IV, the brother of Seleucus IV, had been released by the Romans and was residing in Athens. Wasting no time, he acquired an army from the king of Pergamum, attacked Antioch, killed Heliodorus, and seized the throne. He was to become a major—and infamous—figure in Jewish history. Antiochus was marked by his exile. In Rome he had recognized the power of Roman authority. He never opposed Rome. In Athens he had drunk deeply of the spirit of Hellenism. He supported the Greek cults and games and became a proponent of Hellenistic culture. He was also unpredictable, however, and had little knowledge of or respect for Jewish beliefs.

The Maccabean Revolt

The Maccabean revolt was rooted in the longstanding rivalry between two leading pro-Hellenist families in Jerusalem: the Oniads and the Tobiads. Onias III was the rightful Zadokite high priest.

At the time Antiochus came to the throne (175 B.C.), Onias III was in Antioch, apparently to answer charges of disloyalty brought against him by the Tobiads. His brother, Jason, traveled to Antioch and met with Antiochus. Rather than supporting Onias III, however, Jason offered to pay Antiochus more taxes and a one-time tribute if Antiochus would appoint Jason as high priest, establish a gymnasium in Jerusalem, and designate its citizens as Antiochenes. Although no Seleucid ruler had assumed authority to appoint a high priest, Antiochus readily agreed.

In 172 B.C. Menelaus, a Tobiad whom Jason had sent to Antioch with the annual tribute, offered Antiochus twice the annual taxes Jason was collecting. Antiochus agreed and appointed Menelaus as high priest even though he was not from the Zadokite line and had no claim to the office.

Antiochus IV led a campaign into Egypt (169–168 B.C.) but was forced to retreat by the Romans, who ordered him out of Egypt. Bruised and behind in payments to Rome, he plundered the temple in Jerusalem on one and perhaps two occasions. The Jews were outraged at this sacrilege.

In response to the unrest in Jerusalem, and probably in response to the urgings of the Tobiads, Antiochus sought to Hellenize Jerusalem more completely. He tore down its walls and built a fortress (probably for defense against the Ptolemies). He also ordered that God be called Zeus Olympius in the temple. He erected altars and ordered that the Jews sacrifice swine to Zeus Olympius. Nothing could have been more abhorrent to the Jews.

Pictured above is a marble head of Ptolemy I discovered in Egypt.

When the Seleucid officers attempted to enforce the king's orders in the town of Modein, a Jew by the name of Mattathias killed a fellow Jew who was obeying the orders, killed the officer, and tore down the altar. The revolt had begun.

Mattathias led his five sons into the wilderness. The *Hasidim*, or “pious ones,” among the Jews joined forces with them, and they began a guerrilla style warfare against fellow Jews and local Syrian forces. Shortly after the incident at Modein, Mattathias died; and one of his sons, Judas the Maccabee (*the hammer*), became the leader of the rebellion.

The Jews' knowledge of the land, local support, and surprise attacks helped them to win early victories. By 164 B.C. Judas had won a truce with Syria and cleansed the temple. First Maccabees describes the building of a new altar: They deliberated what to do about the altar of the burnt offering, which had been profaned.... So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them (1 Macc 4:44–46). There was no prophet in Israel at the time, and some thought there would be no prophet until the end of the age or the coming of the Messiah.

The rededication of the temple in mid-December (the 25th of Chislev) 164 B.C. has been celebrated in Jewish communities ever since. The celebration is called Hanukkah, the festival of lights. John 10:22 refers to Hanukkah as “the Feast of Dedication.”

Events outside of Judea influenced the course of events at this point. Judas Maccabaeus was spurred on by his early victories to launch campaigns to gain more land and more power. His efforts were unopposed at first because



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Antiochus IV was killed at this time and because his officers were locked in struggle over his successor. Judas forced Lysias, the Syrian commander, to make peace. The religious freedom of the Jews was officially recognized, and Menelaus was executed. When Demetrius I, son of Seleucus IV, emerged victorious in the struggle to succeed Antiochus IV, he appointed Alcimus, a descendant of Aaron, as high priest. The first stage of the revolt, the fight for religious freedom, had ended.

In 161 B.C. Judas led his dwindling forces against a vastly superior Syrian army and was killed in battle. Jonathan, his brother and a skillful diplomat, became the leader of the Jewish forces. In the years that followed his astute negotiations with changing leaders brought Judea ever closer to full independence from Syrian control.

Alcimus, the high priest, died in 160/159 B.C. Apparently the office was not filled until 152 B.C., though some scholars contend that there must have been a functioning high priest during this period. In 152 B.C. Alexander Balas, who was contending with Demetrius I for the Syrian throne, appointed Jonathan as high priest. This appointment of one of the Maccabee brothers, who were from a priestly family but were not descendants of Zadok, to the office of high priest by one of the descendants of Antiochus Epiphanes is surely one of the ironies of history. It shows, however, how the high priesthood had been increasingly politicized in the intervening years. By this means Jonathan became the political, religious, and military leader of the Jews and an appointee of the Seleucid Empire.

In 145 B.C. the son of Demetrius I defeated both Alexander Balas and Ptolemy VI in battle. He claimed the Syrian throne and took the title Demetrius II. Demetrius II arrested Jonathan and then killed him in 142 B.C. The leadership of Judea fell to Simon, the last of the sons of Mattathias and the first of the Hasmonean rulers.

The effect of the Maccabean revolt influenced the history of the Jews for years to come.

1. The emergence of the *Hasidim*. Zeal for the traditions of their ancestors and obedience to Torah guided these “pious ones.” Although direct connections are difficult to establish, the *Hasidim* were probably the spiritual ancestors of the Pharisees and perhaps of the Essenes.

2. Religious and political freedom. For the first time since the exile the Jews were free from foreign domination. Both a commitment to freedom and a renewed spirit of nationalism were born in the crucible of the Maccabean revolt.

3. Sensitivity to any threat to the law or the temple. The Maccabees had led the struggle for freedom to worship according to the traditions of their ancestors and the deliverance of the temple from “an abomination that causes desolation” (Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). It is not insignificant that Jesus was charged with violating the law (Sabbath law and blasphemy) and threatening to destroy the temple and build another not made with hands (Mark 14:58). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned because he spoke against “this holy place and against the law” (Acts 6:13). Similarly, Paul was charged both with teaching “against our [Jewish] people and our law and this place” and with defiling the temple’s inner courts by admitting a Gentile (Acts 21:28).

Judas Maccabeus pursuing Timotheus (from the Apocrypha, 1 Macc 5:42)

4. Forced adoption of Greek ways was stopped, but subtle adaptation to Hellenism continued. The Maccabees interpreted the law for themselves, determining that it was proper for them to fight on the Sabbath (1 Macc 2:41). They proclaimed a festival to honor their victory in retaking the temple. The office of high priest was also politicized to the point that Jonathan accepted appointment to the office by the Seleucid emperor, Alexander Balas. Even the increased efforts to teach the Torah to Jewish children was consistent with the platonic notion that virtue is teachable.

5. Concentration on the law spurred the development of Pharisaism. The martyrdom of the righteous further led to reflection on the righteousness of God, the principle of just retribution, and the acceptance of belief in life after death (Dan 12:1–2). The righteousness of God would not be frustrated. He would vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked, if not in this life, then after death. Belief in resurrection was still so recent that in the first century the Pharisees and Essenes taught the resurrection of the dead, but the Sadducees did not (Acts 23:8).

6. Apocalyptic literature flourished. Daniel and the many apocalypses of the Pseudepigrapha (see Intertestamental Jewish Literature) testify to the importance of apocalyptic thought during the Maccabean period. Apocalyptic writings taught that history was following a determined course and that after a terrible tribulation, which would come shortly, God would intervene and bring history to an end. The apocalyptic writings were generally written in the name of one of the ancient heroes of Israel (Enoch, Abraham, Baruch). They employed symbolism, animal imagery, tours of heaven, a developed system of angels, and a call for endurance and obedience. The Revelation of John is deeply indebted to the apocalyptic literature of this period.



A bronze bust of Seleucus I found at Herculaneum near Pompeii

7. The Maccabean era gave to Judaism a vitality that enabled it to make its two greatest contributions: Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.

The Hasmoneans

Jonathan's and Simon's rise to power marked the beginning of about eighty years of independence for Judea during which it was ruled by the descendants of the Maccabees. These rulers are called "the Hasmoneans." While the name *Hasmonean* is not used in 1 or 2 Maccabees, Josephus said it was a family name that originated with the great-grandfather of Mattathias. It probably was derived from a place name (Heshmon or Hashmonah).

Simon (142–134 B.C.). When Simon succeeded his brother in leadership of the Jewish forces, Syria was in decline. Both external conflicts (with Rome and the Parthians) and internal instability contributed to this decline. Demetrius II and Trypho were locked in conflict over the throne. Simon supported Demetrius II, and in exchange Demetrius agreed to the cessation of all taxes for Judea. In May 142 B.C. Judea became an independent state. Three other prerogatives of independence soon followed. In 140 B.C. the Jewish people elected Simon their high priest, general, and ethnarch forever "until a trustworthy prophet should arise" (1 Macc 14:41). So began the Hasmonean Dynasty. Judea was ruled by a house of priests who also served as their military and political leaders. The Syrian calendar was abolished, and a Jewish lunar calendar was adopted. Shortly thereafter Antiochus VII Sidetes, the Seleucid ruler from 138 to 128 B.C., granted Simon the right to mint his own coinage.

John Hyrcanus I (134–104 B.C.). In 135/34 B.C. Simon was assassinated by treachery while attending a banquet near Jericho. One of his sons, John Hyrcanus, who already had experience in military affairs, succeeded him. Early in John Hyrcanus's rule, Antiochus VII Sidetes invaded Judea and forced him to surrender. The Seleucid dealt with the Judeans benevolently, but he died in battle in 129 B.C. The death of Antiochus VII marks the end of Seleucid domination of Judea.

In a series of military campaigns John Hyrcanus extended his territory north to Scythopolis, south to Idumea, and east into the Transjordan, an area roughly equivalent to that ruled by David. In 128 B.C. he destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, thus sealing the hostility between Jews and Samaritans (compare John 4:9b, 20). The conquered Idumeans were forced to accept circumcision but were never regarded as Jews.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were first mentioned by Josephus during the reign of John Hyrcanus. When the legitimacy of Hyrcanus's birth was questioned, he rebuffed the Pharisees and supported the Sadducees, thus opening a conflict that continued throughout the period of Hasmonean rule.

Aristobulus I (104–103 B.C.). Aristobulus frustrated his father's plans of dividing power between his widow and Aristobulus by having his mother imprisoned and allowing her to starve to death. He also allowed one of his brothers to be killed. Within a year he himself had died, some say of grief; others suspect that his wife, Salome Alexandra, may have poisoned him.

Aristobulus was the first of the Hasmoneans to claim the title *king*, even though they were not from the lineage of David. The chief accomplishment of his reign was the extension of his power to Galilee and the Judaizing of its inhabitants by forced circumcision.

Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 B.C.). At the death of Aristobulus, his widow, Salome Alexandra, released his imprisoned brothers and married one of them, Alexander Jannaeus. The reign of Alexander Jannaeus marked the beginning of the end of the Hasmonean Dynasty.

Through continual military campaigns Alexander first suffered defeats at the hands of Ptolemy and Cleopatra III. However, he retained his territory and eventually extended it along the coast from Mount Carmel to Gaza. He also added the Decapolis to the territory controlled by Judea. His heavy-handed administration, however, resulted in a civil war with the Pharisees. It has been estimated that some fifty thousand Jews died in the war. At one point the Jewish people appealed to Demetrius III, the Seleucid descendant of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, for help in their fight against Alexander, the descendant of the Maccabees. At the conclusion of this war Alexander had eight hundred Pharisees crucified and executed their families in front of his dying victims.

Salome Alexandra (76–67 B.C.). At the death of Alexander, his widow, Salome Alexandra, the most powerful woman of the Hasmonean dynasty, reported that Alexander had instructed her to make peace with the Pharisees. She ruled in name, while the Pharisees were the real power behind the throne. To her credit she was able to put an end to reprisals and provide a period of relative peace and prosperity. Because she could not serve as high priest,



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she had her son Hyrcanus II (a Pharisee) appointed to this office. Aristobulus II (a Sadducee), another of her sons, was not so easily controlled by his mother. At the time of her death, he was raising an army.

Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II (67–63 B.C.). The forces of the two brothers met near Jericho, and Hyrcanus was defeated. In defeat he found a skillful political ally, Antipater, the son of the governor of Idumea and himself an Idumean. Antipater crafted an alliance between Hyrcanus II and the Nabateans, which enabled Hyrcanus II to defeat his brother.

Overshadowing this provincial sibling rivalry was the advance of Pompey and the power of Rome through Syria. Both brothers appealed to Pompey for his support, and a group of Jews (probably Pharisees) urged Pompey to put an end to the Hasmonean Dynasty. In 63 B.C. Pompey imposed Roman control over Judea, brought the Hasmonean Dynasty to an end, took Aristobulus II back to Rome as a prisoner, and left the weaker brother, Hyrcanus II, as his vassal high priest in Jerusalem.

While Hyrcanus was high priest, the real power in Judea was Antipater, an Idumean but the son of a Jewish mother. He rose in power by loyally supporting Rome at every turn, working first for Pompey, then for Julius Caesar. Although his political shrewdness worked to the advantage of Judea, the Sadducees and even many of the Pharisees hated him. For his loyalty, Julius Caesar named him procurator of Judea. Shortly before he was poisoned to death in 43 B.C., Antipater appointed his sons as governors: Phasel, governor of Judea; and Herod, governor of Galilee.

Herod the Great

The months following Antipater's death were filled with intrigue and revolt. Herod forcefully put down an insurrection in Galilee, winning Roman favor, an extension of his territory (adding Samaria and Coele-Syria), and the hatred of the Jews. Antigonus, one of the sons of Aristobulus, gained the support of the Parthians and took control of Judea. Phasel was killed. Hyrcanus II was captured, and his ears were cut off, thereby preventing him from ever serving as high priest again (Lev 21:17–23). Antigonus was appointed high priest and king of Judea by the Parthians. Herod fled to Petra, then to Egypt, and finally to Rome, where he was appointed king of Judea in 40 B.C.

Judea, however, was still controlled by Antigonus. With Roman support Herod invaded Judea, and by 37 B.C. he had captured Jerusalem and executed Antigonus. He also pursued the bandits who roamed Judea and Galilee and either exterminated them or drove them off.

Herod the Great's extensive building activities included this aqueduct at Caesarea Maritima that was part of an intricate water system built to bring water to the city from the distant mountains.

Herod's rule is a story of tragic contrasts. He sought to win the favor of the Jews, but he was hated because he was an Idumean, an agent of Rome, and a replacement for the Hasmoneans. In response Herod married Mariamne, the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II. He appointed another Aristobulus, grandson of Hyrcanus II, as high priest, but Aristobulus III drowned shortly thereafter. Herod was blamed, but he was ruthless in defense of his power. By the time of his own death, he had ordered the deaths of everyone suspected of intrigue against him. This included Joseph, his uncle, brother-in-law, and trusted aide; Hyrcanus II; Mariamne, whose death grieved him terribly; two of his sons by Mariamne; and Antipater, his eldest son. Along with these family members, other descendants of the Hasmoneans, suspected leaders of the army, and zealous Jewish leaders were executed. The Gospel of Matthew's stories about Herod's efforts to kill the Christ child, though unsupported by nonbiblical sources, are entirely consistent with what we know of Herod's response to threats against his throne.

A view inside the Herodium, a magnificent fortress-palace built by Herod the Great about four miles from Bethlehem.

Herod was a great builder. He built fortresses throughout his territory: the Herodium, Masada, and Machaerus. He built the port at Caesarea, with its aqueduct to bring water from Mount Carmel, and rebuilt Samaria (Sebaste). He built palaces in Jerusalem and in Jericho. Most important, he built a grand, new temple in Jerusalem. The temple was begun in 20–19 B.C. but completed only in A.D. 64, shortly before its destruction in A.D. 70. The Jewish leaders had so little trust for Herod that they would only let him tear down the old temple in stages as it became necessary to clear space for the next section of the new temple. Neither did they call it the Herodian temple; the entire period is known as "Second Temple Judaism."

Herod died in 4 B.C. Before he died he made his sister, Salome, promise to execute a number of Jewish leaders at his death so that there would be mourning throughout the country. She did not carry out this order. Nevertheless, Herod's son Archelaus violently quelled the riots in Judea, and some three thousand died.

Tetrarchs, Procurators, and Kings



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The unrest continued. Herod's will was not effective until it was ratified by the emperor. While the emperor debated what to do with Judea, another revolt broke out there. Varus, the Syrian governor, stamped out the revolt and crucified two thousand rebels. A Jewish delegation appealed to the emperor not to ratify Herod's will. In an apparent compromise, Augustus ratified the will, splitting Herod's territory among three of his sons; but he denied them the title king. Archelaus was made ethnarch of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria. Antipas and Philip were given the lesser rank of tetrarch. Antipas received Galilee and Perea, and Philip was given Batanea (northeast Galilee).

Archelaus (4 B.C.–A.D. 6). Archelaus is remembered as cruel, power hungry, and insensitive to the Jews. The reference to him in Matthew 2:22 is again credible in light of this reputation. So harsh was Archelaus that Augustus removed him from office when a delegation of Jews and Samaritans complained about him. Archelaus was banished to the Rhone valley.

Philip (4 B.C.–A.D. 34). Philip, in contrast, is remembered as a kindly, just, and peaceful ruler. He built Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:13; Mark 8:27) and Bethsaida (John 1:44). Jesus occasionally withdrew to his territory, which was predominantly Gentile.

Antipas (4 B.C.–A.D. 39). Herod Antipas was the son who played the most important role in the events of the New Testament. Jesus called him "that fox" (Luke 13:32). He built his capital, Tiberias, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Because an ancient burial ground was unearthed during the construction of the city, no Jews would live in Tiberias (and it is never recorded that Jesus went there). Instead, it was populated by Gentiles.

On a trip to Rome, Herod Antipas fell in love with Herodias, the wife of Herod Philip. Antipas divorced his Nabatean wife. Herodias divorced Philip, married Herod Antipas, and brought Salome into his court. When Herod, struck by Salome's dancing, pledged to give her whatever she wanted, Herodias prompted Salome to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Josephus said that Herod arrested John the Baptist because he was a political threat and that Herod's defeats in battle with the Nabateans (who were outraged over his divorce from their princess) were God's judgment on him for executing John the Baptist.

Herod Antipas is mentioned in two other New Testament passages. He reportedly thought that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life (Luke 9:7–9), and he refused to convict Him when Pilate sent Jesus to him (Luke 23:6–12).

When Agrippa I was made king of the area that once belonged to Philip, Herodias became jealous and urged her husband, Herod Antipas, to appeal to Caligula for the title king. Agrippa, however, had already reported charges against Herod Antipas. Instead of elevating Antipas, Caligula removed him, gave his territory to Agrippa, and banished him to Lyons.

The Early Procurators in Judea and Samaria (A.D. 6–41)

When Archelaus was removed from office, Judea and Samaria were placed under the rule of procurators who were responsible to the governor of Syria. Caesarea became the official residence of the procurators.

Under Coponius, procurator from A.D. 6–9, a census was ordered by Quirinius, legate of Syria. Remembering 2 Samuel 24, some Jews refused to take part in the census. A brief revolt was led by Judas of Galilee (compare Acts 5:37). Many scholars believe that this census is the one reported by Luke in connection with the birth of Jesus.

Coponius was succeeded by Ambibulus (A.D. 9–12), Rufus (A.D. 12–15), Valerius Gratus (A.D. 15–26), and then by Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26–36). Pilate is remembered as a harsh ruler, despised by the Jews. When he brought imperial shields bearing the image of Caesar into the holy city, the Jews were outraged. On another occasion he massacred Jews in the temple in Jerusalem. Finally, he was sent to Rome to appear before Tiberius after his soldiers killed a number of Samaritans who had gathered on Mount Gerizim.

The administrations of the procurators were generally heavy handed and harsh. Often they did not understand Jewish customs and sensitivities. The high priest's vestments were kept by the procurators so that they could control the celebrations of holy days in the temple. By Roman law the procurators could also impose the death penalty. Two less significant procurators followed Pontius Pilate: Marcellus (A.D. 36) and Marullus (A.D. 37–41).

At the death of Herod (4 B.C.) the power of appointment of the high priest passed first to his son Archelaus (4 B.C.–A.D. 6), then to the Roman procurators in Judea (A.D. 6–41), then Agrippa I (A.D. 41–44), and finally to Agrippa II. Under the Herods high priests were appointed from the family of Boethus. The Roman procurators appointed high priests from the families of Annas (mentioned in the New Testament), Phiabi, and Camithus. Annas, his son-in-law Caiaphas, and three of his sons all served as high priest between A.D. 6 and 41.

Several of the high priests, notably Joazar, Annas, and Jonathan, retained considerable influence even after their terms in office. Hence the role of Annas in the trial of Jesus in the Gospel accounts seems entirely appropriate (see John 18:13, 24).



Agrippa I (A.D. 37–44)

Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great, son of Aristobulus (who was killed in 7 B.C.), and the brother of Herodias (the wife of Herod Antipas). Raised in Rome, he received a Roman education and befriended Gaius, who later became Emperor Caligula. When his friend became the emperor, Agrippa was in debt and in prison. He was immediately rewarded for his friendship, released from prison, given a gold medallion, and appointed king of the territory that had been ruled by Herod Philip.

When Herod Antipas, encouraged by Herodias, appealed for the title king, Caligula removed him from office, banished him to Lyons, and added Galilee to the territory administered by Agrippa. In A.D. 41 Emperor Claudius added Judea, Idumea, and Samaria to Agrippa's vassal kingdom, thus unifying under his control the territories that had been ruled by Herod the Great. Agrippa was, if not genuinely pious, at least sensitive to the Jews and greatly appreciated by them (Acts 12:3). His death in A.D. 44 is described in similar terms by both Acts 12:21–23 and Josephus's *Antiquities*.

Following the death of Agrippa I, his territory was once again administered by procurators, each seemingly more insensitive, harsh, and greedy than his predecessor. The *sicarii*, or dagger men, assassinated their opponents in Jerusalem, and the whole area degenerated into anarchy.

Fadus quickly put down the revolt of Theudas the Galilean (compare Acts 5:36). Famine plagued Judea during the rule of Tiberius Alexander (Acts 11:28–30). A violent outbreak in the temple resulted in the deaths of twenty to thirty thousand people during the administration of Cumanus, who was eventually removed from office for accepting a bribe. Bribery, mismanagement, and incompetence only increased under his successors.

Felix took strong measures against the Zealots. He caught Eleazar, a Zealot leader, and sent him to Rome. He also held Paul in prison for two years in Caesarea. When Festus assumed office, he sent for Agrippa II and Bernice to help him adjudicate Paul's case. At the death of Festus (A.D. 62), Ananus, the high priest, had James, the brother of Jesus, killed. The last two procurators were the worst of the bunch. War became inevitable.

Agrippa II, the seventeen-year-old son of Agrippa I, was made king of Chalcis in A.D. 50. In A.D. 53 he exchanged his territory for the former tetrarchy of Philip, and he was given the right of appointing the Jewish high priests. Galilee and Perea were later added to his kingdom.

Bernice was widowed by the death of Herod of Chalcis in A.D. 48 and moved in with her brother, Agrippa. When the scandal of their relationship became public, she arranged a marriage with King Polemon of Cilicia, but it did not last. She resumed her relationship with Agrippa II. She then had a love affair with the Roman general Titus that continued in Rome after the Jewish war of A.D. 66–70. Titus spurned her when the public protested and had nothing to do with her after he became emperor. After the war Agrippa II moved to Rome also, where he died sometime after A.D. 93.

The War of A.D. 66–70

Matters finally came to a head in A.D. 66. The war was the result of anti-Roman sentiment fueled by the incompetent and greedy procurators, growing anarchy, and factionalism among the Jews. The last straw in these developments was Florus's plundering the temple treasury in Jerusalem. Pilate had done the same, but this time the Jews rebelled. They ceased to offer sacrifices on behalf of Caesar. Zealots took the fortress at Masada and then drove the Romans out of Jerusalem. Anarchy prevailed as Jews and Gentiles massacred each other in the towns and villages.

Josephus was sent to Galilee to prepare for the defense against the Romans there. When Vespasian seized the town of Jotapata in A.D. 67, Josephus escaped and then defected to the Romans. John of Gischala, another Zealot leader, escaped to Jerusalem. By A.D. 68 Vespasian was ready to attack Jerusalem. Then Nero committed suicide, and Vespasian delayed the siege. Within the city various groups—Zealots; sicarii; John of Gischala; Simon, son of Gioras; and the Idumeans—fought among themselves. Eventually Vespasian was appointed emperor and returned to Rome, leaving the prosecution of the war in the hands of his son, Titus.

Titus brutally sacked Jerusalem and burned the temple in A.D. 70. Mopping up operations followed at the Herodium, Machaerus, and finally at Masada. When the ramp at Masada was completed and the wall was breached, the Romans found only two women and five children alive. All the rest had chosen death over defeat.

As a result of this costly revolt, Roman deference toward Judaism ceased. Temple worship was terminated, pagan worship was established in Jerusalem, and the temple tax had to be paid to the god Jupiter. Significant changes among the Jews also occurred. The Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes lost their identity, and the Pharisees became the dominant group.

After the war Johanan ben Zakkai, a student of Hillel, assembled a group of Pharisaic leaders at Jamnia. There they continued to teach Pharisaic traditions. Johanan was succeeded by Gamaliel II. Under his leadership the



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Pharisees determined the boundaries of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and established the prescribed daily prayers. Synagogues flourished in Jewish communities, and the separation of Christians from Judaism became final at about this time.

The Bar Kochba Revolt (A.D. 132–135)

A final revolt broke out in A.D. 132. Rabbi Akiba proclaimed Simon bar Kochba as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy in Numbers 24:17–18. Simon won early victories against the Romans in Judea and minted his own coins. The extent of the hellenization of Judea is illustrated by the fact that recently discovered letters of Simon to his officers are written in Greek. Hadrian's troops eventually retook Judea at great cost to the Romans but even greater cost to the Jews. The death toll has been estimated at 985,000. The final battle took place at Bethar, and both Simon and Akiba were killed.

The result of the revolt was equally devastating. Jews were forbidden to enter into Jerusalem. Circumcision was forbidden, as was Sabbath observance and the reading of the Scriptures in Judea. The Jews were dispersed throughout the Roman world; but they survived as a people without a land, held together only by their faith, their Scriptures, and the synagogue.

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JEWISH INSTITUTIONS, GROUPS, MOVEMENTS

In the midst of the turbulent events of the intertestamental period, institutions, groups, beliefs, and sentiments developed that were to affect both classical Judaism and early Christianity. Josephus characterized the Jewish groups as four philosophies: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. In addition to these groups, the priests and chief priests played an influential role in both religious and political matters. Jewish institutional life in this period centered variously around the temple, the Sanhedrin, and the synagogues. Each of these groups and institutions is treated individually below.

The Pharisees

The *Hasidim* (Hasideans, RSV) mentioned in 1 Maccabees 2:42; 7:13; and 2 Maccabees 14:6 probably included the forerunners of the Pharisees. On the other hand, we know virtually nothing about the diversity or similarity of the *Hasidim* or about their later history.

For our knowledge of the Pharisees we are dependent on Josephus, the New Testament, and later rabbinic sources. According to Josephus, the Pharisees were a politically active group that emerged as a party under John Hyrcanus I (135–104 B.C.). According to the Gospels, the Pharisees were a strict, legalistic group whom Jesus labeled as hypocrites. Acts presents the Pharisees as sympathetic to the Christian witness to the resurrection (5:34–39; 23:6–9). According to the Mishnah and the Talmud, the Pharisees were the scholars and sages of Judaism who devoted their entire lives to living according to the dictates of the Torah. Moreover, it is difficult to determine how much of the oral tradition collected in the Mishnah can be traced back to the early part of the first century. The problem, therefore, is to determine how to use these various sources in constructing our understanding of the Pharisees.

At least this much seems clear. The Pharisees were a lay group—not priests. They maintained their purity by close observance of the law. The Pharisees sought to universalize their adherence to the law through education in the synagogues and school, and at times by means of their political power.

The Pharisees accepted the oral tradition about the interpretation of the law (compare Matt 5:21; Mark 7:3–13). The oral tradition preserved the judgments of the sages regarding how the law should be applied to every aspect of daily life. The sages said three things: “Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence



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around the law.” The oral tradition served, therefore, as “a hedge about the law” so that no one would violate the law in ignorance. The Pharisees also believed in angels and in resurrection (see Acts 23:6–8).

Whereas the Pharisees were politically active during the period of the Hasmoneans, it appears that they shifted their attention from political matters increasingly toward concern with table fellowship, matters of tithing, agricultural laws, and purity under the influence of Hillel (about the time of Jesus’ birth). Hillel, who favored a more lenient, freer interpretation of Scripture was frequently opposed by his contemporary, Shammai, who favored a stricter, less tolerant interpretation. According to rabbinic tradition a non-Jew once asked Hillel to teach him the whole law while the Gentile stood on one foot. Hillel responded: “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.” The early Pharisees also taught that “by three things is the world sustained: by the Law, by the [Temple-]service, and by deeds of loving-kindness.”

At the heart of Pharisaism were the *chaburot*, religious associations that maintained ritual purity, observed the oral traditions, ministered to the needs of the synagogue, and probably maintained an interest in charity. The school of Shammai required a period of probation for a full year, while the school of Hillel required a candidate for membership to demonstrate that he could maintain ritual purity for thirty days. After this probationary period, the new member took an oath before a leader of the *chaburah*, generally a scribe, pledging to maintain purity in all matters and to tithing.

In addition to its internal organization and codes of conduct, which provided for expulsion in certain circumstances, the *chaburot* had assemblies and common meals, which were probably held on Friday evening at the beginning of the Sabbath. The Pharisees also distinguished themselves by observing regular prayer times and reciting the Shema (the central confession of Judaism consisting of Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num 15:37–41) morning and evening.

Following the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, Pharisaism emerged as the dominant party in Judaism, and the school of Hillel emerged as the dominant school within Pharisaism. It is anachronistic, therefore, to view Judaism in the first part of the first century solely in terms of the teaching of the later rabbis. First-century Judaism was much more diverse, with various groups, practices, and ideals competing with one another for survival and influence.

The Sadducees

The name of this group goes back to Zadok, David’s priest (2 Sam 15:24–37). The Zadokites were the ruling priests in Jerusalem from the time of Solomon on. They were linked with Simon II and Onias III, as the legitimate priestly line at the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt. The Zadokites opposed the hellenizing reformers in Jerusalem. There may therefore have been some connection between the Zadokites and the *Hasidim* also. On the other hand, the Zadokites are probably not to be connected directly with the later temple priests, since they seem never to have made peace with the Jerusalem priesthood. At least some of the Zadokite priests left Jerusalem and established the Essene community at Qumran.

The primary difficulty in understanding the Sadducees is that they left no literature. We know the Sadducees only through what the New Testament and the rabbinic (Pharisaic) sources tell us. In the Pharisaic literature “Sadducee” could be used as one who deviated from the Pharisaic norm, so it is difficult to determine what principles they advocated.

Josephus first mentioned the Sadducees during the time of John Hyrcanus. One faction of the Sadducees supported the Hasmoneans and resumed control of the temple cult. The Pharisees and Sadducees represented two different ways Jews responded to the pressure of Hellenism—the adoption of Greek culture. The Sadducees, who were generally aristocrats, had accommodated themselves to a degree of Hellenistic influence. They carefully guarded the prosperity they enjoyed from commerce with the Gentile world. They were religiously conservative in that they supported the temple and the priesthood and held to the traditional faith of the Hebrew Scriptures. They accepted only the Pentateuch as Scripture, but not the Prophets or Writings. They regarded the more recent rulings the Pharisees applied to the Torah as ill-founded, repressive, contrary to the authority of the written law, and contrary to the best interests of the people and the nation. Neither did they believe in angels or in resurrection.

According to Josephus, the Pharisees and the Sadducees also differed over divine providence and human free will. The Pharisees combined various emphases in Scripture to affirm that everything happened according to God’s providence but that humanity is free. Therefore God cooperates with humanity in both good and bad. While not denying human freedom and responsibility, the Essenes went further in affirming that God’s providence controlled and determined everything; one’s destiny and share in the spirits of truth and perversity were foreordained.

The Sadducees—according to Josephus’s presentation of Jewish beliefs, which he explained in Hellenistic terms to a Roman audience—solved the problem of God’s participation in evil by making evil entirely a matter of human



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choice. The Sadducees “deny destiny wholly and entirely and place God beyond the possibility of doing and planning evil. They say that good and evil are man’s choice and that the doing of the one or the other is according to his discretion.”

The Essenes

The Essenes were a sectarian priestly group who withdrew to the desert to study the law and thereby prepare the way for the Lord. The community center at Qumran was established about 130 B.C. under the leadership of the teacher of righteousness. Not all Essenes lived at Qumran, however. The Damascus Document and Josephus refer to Essenes who lived in camps and villages.

Building on the conclusion that the Essenes wrote the scrolls discovered at Qumran, most of what we know about the Essenes comes from the scrolls. They tell us that the Essenes practiced strict ritual purity with periodic washings. The Essenes practiced continual worship, marked by constant study of Scripture, prayers, and praise. There was a hierarchy of leadership and a council. Each member of the community had his own rank.

The Essenes accepted a solar calendar, so their feast days fell on different days from those of the “corrupt” priesthood at the temple in Jerusalem. They also held a sacred community meal. The Manual of Discipline shows that the Essenes expected three end-time figures: the prophet, the messiah of Aaron, and the messiah of Israel. The messiah of Aaron was the priestly messiah, who would take precedence over the royal messiah, the messiah of Israel. The royal messiah would lead the people to victory over the Gentiles, while the priestly messiah would be the final interpreter of the law.

Under the leadership of the teacher of righteousness, the Essenes wrote the first commentaries on the Scriptures (commentaries on Habakkuk; Nahum; and Ps 37). In these they declared that revelation was a two-stage process: mystery (*raz*) and interpretation (*peshet*). The prophets did not understand the full meaning of what they recorded. Indeed, the writings of the prophets spoke of the Teacher of Righteousness and the early history of the Essenes. This meaning was revealed to the Teacher of Righteousness and the community. This approach to the Hebrew Scriptures is also strikingly parallel to the interpretation of the Old Testament in the New. The early Christians interpreted the Scriptures as having been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and the early history of the church.

The settlement at Qumran was destroyed in A.D. 68, probably by the tenth Roman legion. We do not know what happened to the Essenes after the destruction of Qumran. Some may have joined the Zealots at Masada. Others were absorbed into Jewish society. Some probably became Christians, but this can be surmised only by parallels to the scrolls in the early Christian writings.

The Zealots

Josephus called the Zealots the “fourth philosophy.” The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes were identified as the first three. “Zealot” seems to have been a label that could have been pinned on anyone who advocated violent revolt against Roman oppression.

Judas the Galilean led a revolt in Galilee in A.D. 6. Yet although Judas has been regarded by many as the founder of the Zealot party, it is debatable whether there was actually a party of Zealots between A.D. 6 and the events leading to the Jewish War. During the period of A.D. 6 to 44, a period of relative tranquility, there were only sporadic outbursts against Roman excesses.

Thereafter, passive resistance ceased, and there was a breakdown of law and order in the countryside. The numbers of both sicarii (“dagger men”) and prophets predicting God’s dramatic intervention in the Jews’ struggle against Rome increased.

Zeal for the law and the traditions of Israel characterized many groups. During most of the first century, therefore, not all Zealots were revolutionaries, and not all revolutionaries were Zealots. Josephus named five revolutionary groups and described their roles during the war: the Sicarii; John of Gischala and his adherents; Simon, son of Gioras, and his followers; the Idumeans; and the Zealots. The Zealot party that was active during the war of A.D. 66–70 was composed of lower-class priests and laymen in Jerusalem. Its foremost achievement was overthrowing the provisional government that had been established in Jerusalem.

The Priests and Chief Priests

The priests were vital to the life of the Jewish people. They alone could perform the ceremonies and sacrifices on which the welfare of the people depended. The priests sprinkled blood on the altar and made atonement for sin. The zenith of the priesthood in Israel was reached during the Hellenistic period, when the priest was not only the religious leader but the prince, the political leader, who spoke for the people. He was the link between “native altar and alien throne.” A council of elders, the *gerousia* (or Sanhedrin), assisted him in legislative and judicial functions.



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Until 175 B.C. the high priesthood was hereditary, and the office was held for life. In that year the rightful high priest, Onias III, was deposed by the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes. Leading families in Jerusalem supported the more progressive Jason, who promised the king loyalty and great sums of money if he would declare Jerusalem a Greek *polis* and permit him to erect a gymnasium. Within three years Jason was deposed and succeeded by Menelaus, who profaned the sacred vessels in the temple and arranged the murder of Onias III. Shortly thereafter the Maccabees led a revolt against the Seleucids and their supporters in Galilee and Judea.

The last of the pro-Seleucid high priests was Alcimus, who died in 159 B.C. The high priesthood apparently remained vacant for several years. In one of the ironies of history, Jonathan, one of the Maccabean brothers, accepted a Seleucid appointment to the office of high priest in 153 or 152. His brother Simon and his descendants held the joint office of high priest and prince of the Jewish people until 63 B.C. They held the high priesthood until Herod the Great gained control of Jerusalem in A.D. 37.

The priests were responsible for the worship and sacrifices in the temple. The legitimacy of the priestly families was established by their genealogies. Priests were expected to marry only the daughters of other priests. Rank was a matter of pride.

The high priest's duties were largely ceremonial. He was to officiate at the festivals and insure purity. Before taking office, the high priest was examined by the Sanhedrin. The ceremony of consecration involved a bath for purification, putting on the sacred vestments, anointing with oil, further sacrifices and ceremonies, and the laying of portions of the sacrifices on the hands of the priest (Exod 29; Lev 8). The whole ceremony took seven days.

Under Herod (40–4 B.C.) the Hasmonean (Maccabean) control was broken. The high priesthood became an annual appointment, with the high priest being chosen from among the leading families of Jerusalem.



JEWISH SECTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

DATES OF EXISTENCE	NAME	ORIGIN	SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY	BELIEFS	SELECTED BIBLICAL REFERENCES	ACTIVITIES
PHARISEES						
Existed under Jonathan (160–143 B.C.) Declined in power under John Hyrcanus (134–104 B.C.) Began resurgence under Salome Alexandra (76 B.C.)	Pharisees = “the Separated Ones” With three possible meanings: (1) to their separating themselves from people (2) to their separating themselves to the study of the law (“dividing” or “separating” the truth) (3) to their separating themselves from pagan practices	Probably spiritual descendants of the Hasidim (religious freedom fighters of the time of Judas Maccabeus)	Most numerous of the Jewish parties (or sects) Probably descendants of the Hasidim—scribes and lawyers Members of the middle class—mostly businessmen (merchants and tradesmen)	Monotheistic Viewed entirety of the Old Testament (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) as authoritative Believed that the study of the law was true worship Accepted both the written and oral law More liberal in interpreting the law than were the Sadducees Quite concerned with the proper keeping of the Sabbath, tithing, and purification rituals Believed in life after death and the resurrection of the body (with divine retribution and reward) Believed in the reality of demons and angels Revered humanity and human equality Missionary-minded regarding the conversion of Gentiles Believed that individuals were responsible for how they lived	Matt 3:7–10; 5:20; 9:14; 16:1, 6–12; 22:15–22, 34–46; 23:2–36 Mark 3:6; 7:3–5; 8:15; 12:13–17 Luke 6:7; 7:36–39; 11:37–44; 18:9–14 John 3:1; 9:13–16; 11:46–47; 12:19 Acts 23:6–10 Phil 3:4b–6	Developers of oral tradition Taught that the way to God was through obedience to the law Changed Judaism from a religion of sacrifice to a religion of law Progressive thinkers regarding the adaptation of the law to situations Opposed Jesus because He would not accept the teachings of the oral law as binding Established and controlled synagogues Exercised great control over general population Served as religious authorities for most Jews Took several ceremonies from the temple to the home Emphasized ethical as opposed to theological action Legalistic and socially exclusive (shunned non-Pharisees as unclean) Tended to have a self-sufficient and haughty attitude



SADDUCEES

Probably began about 200 B.C. Demise occurred in A.D. 70 (with the destruction of the temple)	Sadducees = Three possible translations: (1) "the Righteous Ones"—based on the Hebrew consonants for the word <i>righteous</i> (2) "ones who sympathize with Zadok," or "Zadokites"—based on their possible link to Zadok the high priest (3) "syndics," "judges," or "fiscal controllers"—based on the Greek word <i>syndikoi</i>	Unknown origin Claimed to be descendants of Zadok—high priest under David (see 2 Sam 8:17; 15:24) and Solomon (see 1 Kgs 1:34-35; 1 Chr 12:28) Had a possible link to Aaron Were probably formed into a group about 200 B.C. as the high priest's party	Aristocracy—the rich descendants of the high-priestly line (however, not all priest were Sadducees) Possible descendants of the Hasmonean priesthood Probably not as refined as their economic position in life would suggest	Accepted only the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy—the written law of Moses) as authoritative Practiced literal interpretation of the law Rigidly conservative toward the law Stressed strict observance of the law Observed past beliefs and tradition Opposed oral law as obligatory or binding Believed in the absolute freedom of human will—that people could do as they wished without attention from God Denied divine providence Denied the concept of life after death and the resurrection of the body Denied the concept of reward and punishment after death Denied the existence of angels and demons Materialistic	2 Sam 8:17; 15:24 1 Kgs 1:34 1 Chr 12:26-28 Ezek 40:45-46; 43:19; 44:15-16 Matt 3:7-10; 16:1, 6-12; 22:23-34 Mark 12:18-27 Luke 20:27-40 John 11:47 Acts 4:1-2; 5:17-18; 23:6-10	In charge of the temple and its services Politically active Exercised great political control through the Sanhedrin, of which many were members Supported the ruling power and the status quo Leaned toward Hellenism (the spreading of Greek influence)—and were thus despised by the Jewish populace Opposed both the Pharisees and Jesus because these lived by a larger canon (The Pharisees and Jesus both considered more than only Genesis through Deuteronomy as authoritative.) Opposed Jesus specifically for fear their wealth/position would be threatened if they supported Him
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ZEALOTS

Three possibilities for their beginning (1) during the reign of Herod the Great (about 37 B.C.) (2) during the revolt against Rome (A.D. 6) (3) traced back to the Hassidim or the Maccabees (about 168 B.C.) Their demise occurred around A.D. 70–73 with Rome’s conquering of Jerusalem.

Refers to their religious zeal Josephus used the term in referring to those involved in the Jewish revolt against Rome in A.D. 6—led by Judas of Galilee

(According to Josephus) The Zealots began with Judas (the Galilean), son of Ezekias, who led a revolt in A.D. 6 because of a census done for tax purposes

The extreme wing of the Pharisees

Similar to the Pharisees with this exception: believed strongly that only God had the right to rule over the Jews. Patriotism and religion became inseparable. Believed that total obedience (supported by drastic physical measures) must be apparent before God would bring in the Messianic Age. Were fanatical in their Jewish faith and in their devotion to the law—to the point of martyrdom

Matt 10:4
Mark 3:18
Luke 6:15
Acts 1:13

Extremely opposed to Roman rule over Palestine
Extremely opposed to peace with Rome
Refused to pay taxes
Demonstrated against the use of the Greek language in Palestine
Engaged in terrorism against Rome and others with whom they disagreed politically
(Sicarii [or Assassins] were an extremist Zealot group who carried out acts of terrorism against Rome.)

HERODIANS

Existed during the time of the Herodian dynasty (which began with Herod the Great in 37 B.C.)
Uncertain demise

Based on their support of the Herodian rulers (Herod the Great or his dynasty)

Exact origin uncertain

Wealthy, politically influential Jews who supported Herod Antipas (or any descendant of Herod the Great) as ruler over Palestine (Judea and Samaria were under Roman governors at this time.)

Not a religious group—but a political one
Membership probably was comprised of representatives of varied theological perspectives

Matt 22:5–22
Mark 3:6; 8:15; 12:13–17

Supported Herod and the Herodian dynasty
Accepted Hellenization
Accepted foreign rule



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ESSENES

Probably began during Maccabean times (about 168 B.C.)—around the same time as the Pharisees and the Sadducees began to form	Unknown origin	Possibly developed as a reaction to the corrupt Sadducean priesthood	Scattered throughout the villages of Judea (possibly including the community of Qumran)	Very strict ascetics Monastic: most took vow of celibacy (adopting male children in order to perpetuate the group), but some did marry (for the purpose of procreation)	None	Devoted to the copying and studying of the manuscripts of the law
Uncertain demise—possibly in A.D. 68–70 with the collapse of Jerusalem		Have been identified with various groups: Hasidim, Zealots, Greek influence, or Iranian influence	(According to Philo and Josephus) About 4,000 in Palestinian Syria	Rigidly adherent to the law (including a strict rendering of the ethical teachings)		Lived in a community sense with communal property
				Considered other literature as authoritative (in addition to the Hebrew Scripture)		Required a long probationary period and ritual baptisms of those wishing to join
				Believed and lived as pacifists		Were highly virtuous and righteous
				Rejected temple worship and temple offerings as corrupted		Were extremely self-disciplined
				Believed in the immortality of the soul with no bodily resurrection		Were diligent manual laborers
				Apocalyptically oriented		Gave great importance to daily worship
						Upheld rigid Sabbath laws
						Maintained a non-Levitical priesthood
						Rejected worldly pleasures as evil
						Rejected matrimony—but did not forbid others to marry

The high priest continued to exercise leadership over the Sanhedrin and to officiate in the temple on certain occasions. In particular, the high priest presided over the sin offerings on the Day of Atonement, when he entered the holy of holies to secure atonement for the people of Israel. On that day the high priest had to be in a state of absolute purity, so in the first century steps were taken to eliminate any possibility of defilement. The high priest took up residence in a room in the temple during the week before the Day of Atonement. This practice may have been instituted following the defilement of Simon, son of Camithus, in A.D. 20. On the evening before the Day of Atonement, Simon was touched by an Arab's spittle. He therefore was prevented from officiating at the ceremonies. In addition, the high priest was kept awake all night before the Day of Atonement to prevent defilement from a nocturnal discharge (Lev 22:4).

At the death of Herod (4 B.C.) the power of appointment of the high priest passed first to his son Archelaus (4 B.C.–A.D. 6), then to the Roman procurators in Judea (6–41), then to Agrippa I (41–44), and finally to Agrippa II. Under the Herods, high priests were appointed from the family of Boethus. The Roman procurators appointed high priests from the families of Annas (mentioned in the New Testament), Phiabi, and Camithus. Annas, his son-in-law Caiaphas, and three of his sons all served as high priest between A.D. 6 and 41.



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Several of the high priests—notably Joazar, Annas, and Jonathan—retained considerable influence even after their term in office. Hence the role of Annas in the trial of Jesus in the Gospel accounts seems entirely appropriate (see John 18:13, 24).

The plural “chief priests” occurs frequently in the Gospels and Acts and twice in Hebrews. This term seems to refer to those priests who had prominent positions of responsibility over other priests. Some scholars contend, however, that it designates the high priest, former high priests, and members of the aristocratic families from which the high priests were selected (Acts 4:6). Priests from such families, however, were no doubt given positions of influence.

The captain of the temple, who was responsible for oversight of the temple ceremonies, was the head of the chief priests, who included the leaders of the weekly and daily courses of priests and the temple treasurers.

From such a holy heritage and such an exalted position of religious and political influence, the office of the high priest fell to dismal corruption. In the years before the war of 66–70 the high priest surrounded himself by gangs of ruffians who terrorized the city and seized the tithes that belonged to the ordinary priests. The high priestly families also sent their gangs against each other. Mercifully, the power of such high priests ended with the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

The priests were organized into twenty-four weekly courses, each of four to nine daily courses. The Levites stood in lower rank to the priests and took no part in offering the sacrifices. The singers and musicians, however, were the upper strata of the Levites and had to have proof of pure descent. Other Levites served as temple servants and guards.

The Temple

The temple was the spiritual center of Judaism. The first temple was built between about 960 and 953 B.C. by Solomon. After the destruction of this temple by the Babylonians, the second temple, Zerubbabel’s temple, was built on the same site between 520 and 515; but his temple was not as splendid as its predecessor.

As part of his efforts to gain favor with the Jews and impress the Romans with the importance of Judea, Herod the Great began construction of a magnificent new temple in 20/19 B.C. The temple was built on a massive platform with a circumference of 3,400 feet (which was later extended to the present circumference of 5,000 feet). John 2:20 says that at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry the temple had been under construction for forty-six years. It was not completed until the time of Albinus (A.D. 62–64). An army of laborers had been involved in the construction; Josephus reported that there were ten thousand lay workers and a thousand priests. The temple towered over the holy city, and its beauty was dazzling (compare Mark 13:1).

The Golden Gate was the main entrance to the temple from the east. It led directly into the court of the Gentiles, a large open area surrounded by colonnaded walls. At the center of the temple area on the west side, one passed through the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:2) into the court of the women. No Gentile could enter through the Beautiful Gate (compare Acts 21:28–29). In each corner of the court of the women were small courtlike chambers: the chambers of the wood, of the Nazirites, of the oil, and the chamber for the purification of the lepers. Ascending fifteen curved steps, one entered through the great bronze doors of the Nicanor Gate into the court of the Israelites.

Reconstruction of Herod’s Temple (20 B.C.–A.D. 70) at Jerusalem as viewed from the southwest and from the upper city. The drawing reflects data from archaeological discoveries made since excavations began in 1967 at the southwest corner and along the south end of the temple mount platform. Shown are Wilson’s Arch (left center) spanning the Tyropeon Valley, Robinson’s Arch and staircase leading up from the lower city, and the now-famous Herodian monumental staircase also leading up to the Double (Huldah) Gate along the south facade.

Only priests were allowed beyond the court of the Israelites to the area of the great altar, the porch, and the sanctuary. The marble facade of the sanctuary was 165 feet high and 165 feet wide. Two columns of reddish marble represented the two columns that had stood in front of Solomon’s temple. The entire structure was ornately gilded so that it gleamed in the sun. Inside the sanctuary the priests burned incense (Luke 1:8–11). Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the holy of holies.

Jesus foresaw the destruction of the temple (Mark 13:2); and in A.D. 70, only a few years after its completion, Herod’s temple was destroyed. So much gold was carried off from the destruction of the temple that Josephus said that the gold market throughout Syria was glutted: “The standard of gold was depreciated to half its former value.”

The Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin is mentioned in the Gospels and Acts as a judicial body in Jerusalem. Jesus, Paul, and some of the apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin. The New Testament also mentions sanhedrins elsewhere (“local



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councils,” Matt 10:17; Mark 13:9). The evidence is conflicting, leading scholars to debate whether the Sanhedrin was composed of political leaders, religious leaders, or both. The Mishnah contains a tractate called *Sanhedrin* that speaks of a great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem composed of seventy-one members and presided over by the high priest. The composition and powers of the Sanhedrin changed with the appointment of a procurator in A.D. 6 and again in A.D. 70 in the aftermath of the war. With some variation in the balance of power in different periods, the Sanhedrin was composed of the chief priests, the elders, Sadducees, and Pharisees. Successively, the Hasmoneans, Herods, and procurators controlled and limited the powers of the Sanhedrin. The prerogative of the Sanhedrin to hear capital punishment cases during the time of Pilate is debated, though there are references to several executions during the period between A.D. 6 and 70.

There were also lesser councils of twenty-three members and courts of three. The Mishnah instructs that every town that had 120 males should have a court of twenty-three.

The Synagogue

The synagogue had more influence than any other Jewish institution. It enabled Judaism to survive the destruction of the wars of A.D. 66–70 and 132–135. It provided Jewish communities with a center for worship and learning, and it left its mark on Christianity and Islam. A synagogue was also called a house of prayer or a house of study. The origin of the synagogue is disputed. The earliest archaeological evidence comes from Egypt in the third century B.C. The oldest evidence of a Palestinian synagogue is from the first Christian century, but no Galilean synagogue structure survives from that time.

A view of the reconstructed walls of the Jewish synagogue in the ancient city of Sardis (in modern Turkey).

The theories for the origin of the synagogue have been as follows:

1. Preexilic. The synagogue developed from the schools of the prophets. This view is now generally dismissed.
2. Exilic. The exile would have been a natural climate in which the synagogue might develop. How did the pious Jews continue their worship? Perhaps they met first in their homes during the exile.
3. Postexilic. Ezra introduced the Torah to Judea. It was read publicly and interpreted for the people in Aramaic, which may have led to regular gatherings for worship and study of Torah.
4. Maccabean. The archeological evidence from Egypt now excludes such a late date. The choice is between the exilic and postexilic positions. The issue is how far back the synagogue can be traced and where it originated. By the first century, however, the synagogue was so well established that it could be found everywhere there were Jews. Paul went first to the synagogues in each of the towns he visited.

The later synagogues, about which we have more information, contained several items of furniture. The Torah was kept in an ark or chest that was screened from the sight of the congregation. A bema or raised platform was used for the reading of Scripture (see Neh 8:4–5). Matthew 23:2 speaks of “Moses’ seat,” which may have been a seat of honor or the seat where the reader of the Torah would sit. One stood to read or pray and sat down to teach. The synagogues usually contained stone benches around the walls. The congregation stood or sat on mats. It is sometimes said that women were separated from the men and only allowed in their galleries, but the evidence is quite unclear. What is clear is that women played a prominent role in the Hellenistic Jewish synagogues. The menorah was a favorite gift one could make to the synagogue, as rabbinic sources of the second and third centuries indicate.

The head of the synagogue was the *archisynagogos* (compare Acts 13:15). The office seems to have been an elective one, perhaps for a term of one year, though in some instances the head of the synagogue could be elected for life. The head of the synagogue presided in the assemblies and probably later became responsible for the synagogue building and was the head of the council of the community.

The *hazzan* was the assistant. He took the Torah scroll and gave it to whoever was reading. He also announced the advent of the Sabbath and the festivals from the roof of the synagogue.

Although we do not know exactly what transpired in a Jewish synagogue, the following seem to have been elements in the worship there:

1. The Shema, which eventually included Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41, was recited in Hebrew each morning and each evening (compare Mark 12:29–30).
2. The Decalogue. Although the recitation of the Decalogue was part of synagogue worship in the first century, it was later omitted. Both the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmuds tell the story of its disappearance from the daily service because of “the fault finding of the heretics” who said that only the Decalogue and not the Shema was given to Moses at Mount Sinai.



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3. The Eighteen Benedictions were recited every morning, afternoon, and evening. The prayer was prescribed, but the wording was not always fixed. In the synagogue the congregation responded with “Amen” after each blessing. Probably as a result of the influence of these prayers, the early Christians took over the practice of praying three times daily (compare Acts 2:15; 3:1; 10:9; Didache 8.3).

4. The Scripture lesson was the central feature of synagogue worship. As early as Ezra (Neh 8) we hear of the public reading of Scripture followed by a translation into Aramaic. Any member of the synagogue could be called on to read, though in practice the *hazzan* may have read most of the time. At first the passages were selected freely. Then the readers were prohibited from skipping from place to place. Ultimately the Torah was divided into sections (*sedarim*) so that the reading could be completed in a set length of time. Some have argued that the triennial cycle of readings was established by the first century, but the Mishnah makes no reference to it; so it appears that it did not become standard until the third century.

5. Psalms. Almost certainly the use of psalms in the temple was adapted to the synagogue, but the evidence is not explicit. The daily recitation of psalms was a part of the worship of pious individuals. The Hallel (Pss 113–118), a song of praise to the Lord, was recited in the homes (Matt 26:30) and in the temple and synagogue at Passover and other festivals.

6. The Homily. Scripture readings and homilies (sermons) were confined to Mondays, Thursdays, the Sabbath, and festivals (compare Luke 4:16–30; Acts 13:15–48). The homily can be traced to Nehemiah 8:8, which says that Ezra gave the sense of what had been read. The Mishnah made no attempt to regulate the method or content of the homily. Most of the sermonic expositions (or *midrashim*) that we have come from after A.D. 400. They show that the preachers worked a great deal of Scripture into their sermons, thereby familiarizing hearers with the texts. The preacher normally closed the homily with a brief prayer.

7. The Blessing. At the signal of the *hazzan*, the service would be closed by a priestly blessing if a priest was present to pronounce it. This practice may have developed only after the destruction of the temple.

Sources for Additional Study

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INTERTESTAMENTAL JEWISH LITERATURE

An amazing quantity and variety of Jewish literature has survived from the period of 200 B.C. to A.D. 200. This body of literature sheds a great deal of light on the Jewish origins and context of the early church. It supplies information on the history of this period and the diversity of groups, movements, practices, and beliefs among the Jews of this time. While this literature is of great historical and interpretive value, care must be taken to establish the date, place of writing, and point of view of each document.

The Septuagint

The Septuagint was the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. According to the Letter of Aristeas, it was translated by seventy-two translators in Alexandria under Pharaoh Ptolemy II (285–247 B.C.). The Letter of Aristeas, however, appears to have been written to promote the accuracy and authority of the Septuagint (often abbreviated LXX). Actually, the Greek translations came into being over a period of time. It was the first translation of Scripture. It was needed because the Greek language was dominant in Jewish communities in Alexandria and elsewhere in the Jewish dispersion.

The Septuagint was widely used among early Christians. It is not always clear which text of Scripture is being quoted in the New Testament. Where differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts allow us to identify the text that is being quoted, 80 percent of the quotations of the Old Testament in the New come from the Septuagint. The Septuagint also provides insight into the Hebrew Scriptures by representing a separate textual tradition, by enabling us to understand what corresponding Hebrew and Greek words meant to the translators, and by study of the way in which the translators worked.

The Apocrypha

Apocrypha now refers to those books in the Septuagint that were not part of the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, the limits of the Apocrypha are not so clearly defined. The term *Apocrypha* means *hidden*. It came to be applied to books that were either considered to hold hidden teachings or books that because of their teachings should be hidden (see



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Dan 12:4, 9; 2 Esdras 14:4–6; 12:37–38; 14:42–46). These passages reflect the development of *apocrypha* to mean *noncanonical* or *nonscriptural*.

The collection of Hebrew Scriptures was closed about A.D. 100. Thereafter the Apocrypha fell into disuse among the Jews. Prior to this time, however, the situation had been much more fluid. Copies of several books of the Apocrypha (Sirach, Tobit) were found at Qumran along with many books of the Pseudepigrapha. Jerome used *apocryphal* to indicate books that were noncanonical but not heretical. Nevertheless, the term came to mean *spurious* or *heretical*.

Fifteen books or portions of books have been called “apocrypha.” Second Esdras did not appear in the Septuagint but did appear in the Latin Vulgate. The Council of Trent in 1546 decreed that the Old Testament canon included the apocrypha except the Prayer of Manasseh and 1 and 2 Esdras. These three books were put in an appendix following the New Testament in subsequent editions of the Vulgate.

Today *Apocrypha* is a Protestant term. Roman Catholics call the books of the Apocrypha “Deuterocanonical,” which means that the books are not spurious but *added later to the canon*. The Eastern Orthodox canon includes the “deuterocanonical” books 1 Esdras, Psalm 151, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 3 Maccabees. Fourth Maccabees is added in an appendix. The Slavonic or Russian Orthodox Bibles contain the deuterocanonical books 1 and 2 Esdras, Psalm 151, and 3 Maccabees.

All of the books of the Apocrypha were written by Jewish authors, and all probably were written in Hebrew and Aramaic except for the Wisdom of Solomon and 2 Maccabees. The Hebrew writings were then translated into Greek and circulated with the Writings of the Old Testament, which attests to their wide popularity. The Law and the Prophets had already acquired standing as Scripture, but the Writings circulated with great fluidity. Some writings had authority for one community but not for another. After the collection of Hebrew Scriptures was fixed, the “outside books” were regarded as troublesome or dangerous. Only Sirach, of the apocryphal literature, continued to be used sporadically by Jewish writers. Rabbi Akiba stated that among those who have no part in the world to come is “he who reads in the outside books.” A midrash or exposition on Ecclesiastes 12:12 states: “Whoever brings together in his house more than twenty-four books [that is, the Jewish enumeration of the books of the Hebrew OT] brings confusion.” The preservation of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha is due, therefore, almost entirely to their popularity among Christians.



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THE APOCRYPHA

TITLES (listed alphabetically)	APPROXIMATE DATES	LITERARY TYPES	THEMES	IN SEPTUAGINT?	IN ROMAN CATHOLIC CANON?
Baruch	150 B.C.	Wisdom & narrative (composite)	Praise of wisdom, law, promise of hope, opposition to idolatry	Yes	Yes
Bel and the Dragon	100 B.C.	Detective narrative at end of Daniel	Opposition to idolatry	Yes	Yes
Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus Sirach)	180 B.C. in Hebrew; 132 B.C. Greek Translation	Wisdom	Obedience to law, praise of patriarchs, value of wisdom; patriotism; temple worship; retribution; free will	Yes	Yes
1 Esdras	150	History (621-458)	Proper worship; power of truth	Yes	No
2 Esdras	A.D. 100	Apocalypse with Christian preface and epilog	Pre-existent, dying Messiah; punishment for sin; salvation in future; inspiration; divine justice; evil	No	No
Additions to Esther (103 verses)	114 B.C.	Religious amplification	Prayer; worship; revelation; God's activity; providence	Yes	Yes
Letter of Jeremiah	317 B.C.	Homily added to Baruch based on Jer 29	Condemns idolatry	Yes	Yes
Judith	200 B.C.	Historical novel	Obedience to law; prayer; fasting; true worship patriotism	Yes	Yes
1 Maccabees	90 B.C.	History (180-161 B.C.)	God works in normal human events; legitimates Hasmonean kings	Yes	Yes
2 Maccabees	90 B.C.	History (180-161 B.C.)	Resurrection; creation from nothing; miracles; punishment for sin; martyrdom; temple angels	Yes	Yes
3 Maccabees	75 B.C.	Festival legend	Deliverance of faithful; angels	Some mss.	No



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4 Maccabees	10 B.C.	Philosophical treatise based on 2 Macc 6-7	Power of reason over emotions; faithfulness to law; martyrdom	Some mss.	No
Prayer of Azariah and Song of Three Young Men	100 B.C.	Liturgy; hymn & additions to Dan 3:23	Praise; God's response to prayer	Yes	Yes
Prayer of Manasseh	120 B.C.	Prayer of penitence based on 2 Kgs 21:10-17 2 Chr 33:11-19	Prayer of repentance	Yes	Yes
Psalms 151	?	Victory hymn	Praise to God who uses young & inexperienced	Yes	No
Susanna	100 B.C.	Detective story at end of Daniel	Daniel's wisdom; God's vindication of faithfulness	Yes	Yes
Tobit	200 B.C.	Folktale	Temple attendance; tithing; charity; prayer; obedience to Jewish law; guardian angel; divine	Yes	Yes
Wisdom of Solomon	10 B.C. in Egypt	Wisdom personified; Jewish apologetic	Value of wisdom and faithfulness, immortality	Yes	Yes

While approximately 80 percent of the quotations in the New Testament reproduce the Septuagint, there are no quotations from the Apocrypha, which probably indicates that these books were not regarded quite as highly as the Hebrew Scriptures. Still, there are allusions to the Apocrypha in the New Testament (Ecclesiasticus 5:11 in Jas 1:19; 2 Maccabees 6-7 in Heb 11:35-36; Wisdom of Solomon 2:18 in Matt 27:43). Philo adhered to the Hebrew canon. Josephus used 1 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, and the additions to Esther as Scripture in his *Antiquities*.

Among the church fathers, Clement, Origen, and Cyprian believed the Apocrypha was part of the Christian Bible. Cyril of Jerusalem and Jerome were more explicit about separating the Apocrypha from the other books. They were the first to use *Apocrypha* to designate the books of the Greek and Latin Bibles which were not included in the Hebrew Bibles. Because the books of the Apocrypha were commonly accepted, Jerome included them in his translation of the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate), but he carefully marked each work with a note indicating that it was not in the Hebrew Bible. Later copies overlooked the notes. Jerome also wrote that the Apocrypha could be read for edification, but not "for confirming the authority of Church dogmas" (Prologue to Books of Solomon).

Throughout the Middle Ages the Apocrypha was regarded as canonical. When John Wycliffe (about 1382) produced the first English translation of the Bible, it included all of the Apocrypha except 2 Esdras. The prologue to the Old Testament, however, specified a distinction between the Apocrypha and the Hebrew canon. The former, Wycliffe wrote, "shall be set among the apocrypha, that is, without authority over beliefs."

Both doctrinal disputes and a revival of the study of Hebrew contributed to the growing distinction between the Hebrew canon and the Apocrypha. The reformers distinguished between the two because the basis for the Roman Catholic teachings on works and purgatory was contained in the Apocrypha: justification by works (Ecclesiasticus 3:3, 14-15, 30; Tobit 4:7-11; 12:9; 14:11); merits of the saints (Song of the Three Young Men 12); purgatory and prayers for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:43-45).



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When Luther produced his German version of the Bible in 1534, he separated the Apocrypha, placing it in an appendix with the superscription: "Apocrypha, these are books which are not held equal to the sacred Scriptures and yet are useful and good for reading." In this appendix he included Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Judith, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the additions to Daniel, Esther, and the Prayer of Manasseh (but not 1 and 2 Esdras). He also separated Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation to the end of the New Testament because he did not consider them to be among the principal witnesses to Jesus Christ.

The Council of Trent (1546) responded to the reformers' innovations by issuing what the Roman Catholic Church regards as the first infallible declaration on the canon. All of the Apocrypha except the Prayer of Manasseh and 1 and 2 Esdras were accepted as Scripture. In 1592 the official edition of the Vulgate included these three books in an appendix to the New Testament.

The Church of England took a moderating position, quoting Jerome's statement that the books of the Apocrypha should be read for edification but not as a basis for the church's doctrine. The lectionary attached to the Book of Common Prayer has therefore prescribed lessons from the Apocrypha.

As early as 1599 the Puritans began excluding from their Bibles all books that were not regarded as Scripture. The position of the Reformed tradition is succinctly stated in the third article of the Westminster Confession (1647): "The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are not part of the Canon of Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be in any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings."

The King James Version, being the authorized version of the Church of England, contained the books of the Apocrypha scattered among the canonical books in its first printing (1611). In 1615 the Archbishop of Canterbury directed that no Bibles were to be bound or sold without the Apocrypha. Nevertheless, several printings of the King James Version between 1616 and 1633 lack the Apocrypha. After a bitter struggle the British and Foreign Bible Society announced in 1827 that they would exclude the Apocrypha from their printed copies of the English Bible.

A brief description of each of the books of the Apocrypha follows:

First Esdras. First Esdras traces the history of the Jews from Josiah through the times of Zerubbabel and Ezra, emphasizing their contributions to the reform of Israelite worship. First Esdras 3:1–5:6 is an old Persian or Babylonian tale of three young men in the court of Darius that has been interpolated into the document. The theme of this segment of wisdom literature is that truth is mighty and prevails. The interpolation can be traced to the Persian period (538–331 B.C.), but 1 Esdras probably was written in the second century B.C. First Esdras is important for our knowledge of postexilic Judaism and supplements the parallel accounts in 2 Chronicles 35:1–36:23; Ezra; and Nehemiah 7:38–8:12.

Second Esdras. Second Esdras (or Fourth Ezra) is a profound apocalyptic treatment of God's providence in history. Written about A.D. 100, after the destruction of Jerusalem, it wrestles with the questions: How could God's people hold together the actual facts of history and a belief in a just God who had promised to bless His people? What was the origin of moral evil? How would anyone be justified in the last judgment? Why had God let His people suffer? Was there, then, any basis for hope?

Second Esdras reports seven visions in which the seer was instructed by the angel Uriel. The author knew the traditional answers to the problem of evil: Adam's sin, the evil inclination, or the fallen angels. He rejected all dualistic systems, however, and never mentioned Satan. Instead, he accepted that humanity was responsible for its own destiny. Finally, his thoroughgoing monotheism drove him to the conclusion that God was responsible for the evil in the human heart, and any hope for humanity rested with God. Humankind could not obey the law because of the evil in the human heart, but God loves His creation and has not forgotten His people.

Tobit. Tobit is a delightful folktale written shortly after 200 B.C. that presents a vivid description of Jewish morality prior to the Maccabean era.

A pious Jew named Tobit, living in Nineveh, became blind. Being in need, he sent his son Tobias to collect a deposit he had left in Media. God heard Tobit's prayer and sent an angel, Raphael, to guide him and reveal magic formulas that could heal Tobit's blindness. God also heard the prayers of Sarah, whose seven successive bridegrooms had each been killed by a demon on their wedding night, and guided Tobias to her. Tobias married Sarah, and with one of Raphael's formulas drove off the demon. In the end Tobias completed his mission and returned home with his bride, the money, and a formula that restored Tobit's sight.

The author's religion is primarily personal rather than nationalistic. God is merciful and just. The basis for piety was therefore devotion to God and trust in God's just retribution. Sin and virtue inevitably brought reward or



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punishment, even if the just suffered temporarily. There is no reference to resurrection, but Tobit's system of angels was well advanced over the Old Testament and comparable to Jubilees and 1 Enoch.

Judith. Judith is a spellbinding story of a heroine who delivers her town from the siege of Holofernes, a Persian general about 350 B.C. The story itself was probably written down or rewritten about 100 B.C. Anachronisms make it difficult to assess the historical value of the story.

When Holofernes laid siege to Bethulia, Judith, a beautiful, pious, and resourceful widow, initiated a carefully devised plan to deliver the town. She made her way to Holofernes's camp and then craftily prepared her escape. When she was alone with Holofernes in his tent and he was thoroughly intoxicated, she decapitated him and returned to Bethulia with her gruesome trophy.

Judith may naturally be compared with Esther. She stands in the tradition of Jael (Judg 4:17–22; 5:24–27), the woman of Thebez (Judg 9:53), Deborah (Judg 4–5), the wise woman of 2 Samuel 20:14–22, and Esther. Judith's religion was vigorously nationalistic, a blend of patriotism and piety. She scrupulously obeyed the law of Moses in regard to dietary laws, fasting, prayer at fixed times, and ritual pollutions. The end of defending her nation and her religion justified her breach of moral law.

Additions to Esther. Additions were apparently added to biblical Esther by Lysimachus, an Alexandrian Jew who translated the book from Hebrew into Greek about 114 B.C., or by others shortly thereafter. The six additions were interspersed at various points in the Greek text. Jerome separated them and placed the additions at the end of Esther, where they received the following chapter and verse numbers in the Latin Vulgate: Mordecai's dream (11:2–12:6); the first royal letter (13:1–7); Mordecai's and Esther's prayers (13:8–14:19); Esther's appearance before the king (15:1–16); the second royal letter (16:1–24); and the interpretation of Mordecai's dream (10:4–11:1).

Canonical Esther contains no reference to God or religious practices. The additions, however, give the book a religious character by introducing fifty references to God, God's providential care for His people, and God's intervention in history. The additions convey an anti-Gentile attitude and emphasize prayer, fasting, and the temple cult.

The Wisdom of Solomon. The Wisdom of Solomon was probably written as a defense of the Jewish belief in God by a Hellenistic Jew about the time of Jesus' birth. It addressed pious Jews to encourage them, erring Jews to call them back to their faith, and Gentiles to convert them. This thoroughly Jewish theme was presented in a thoroughly Hellenized style that appealed to the cardinal virtues of Platonism and Stoicism. Parts of the book are lyrical and poetic; elsewhere its prose is ponderous.

The author personified wisdom and combined it with the Stoic concept of the *logos*. It was only a short step, therefore, from the Wisdom of Solomon to the use of *logos* (*Word*) in the prologue to the Gospel of John, though no direct dependence can be shown. The Wisdom of Solomon encouraged Jews to take pride in their traditional faith and justified their present suffering through the promise of immortality.

Sirach. The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus, is often called Sirach for short. Sirach shows us a wisdom teacher—Jesus the son of Sirach or Joshua ben Sira in Hebrew—on his way to becoming an interpreter of the law. Like the Book of Proverbs, it opens with a praise of wisdom and closes with an alphabetic acrostic. Ben Sira was a teacher in a wisdom school (compare 51:23–30). There were apparently various wisdom schools in Jerusalem at the time (see Sirach's characterization of other teachers in 37:19–26). Ben Sira cannot be identified with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or even the Hasidim. Rather, he represented a wisdom teacher reacting to Hellenism during the period immediately preceding the Maccabean revolt.

There are no references to resurrection or immortality, nor is there any reference to a synagogue. On the other hand, Sirach reflects a positive attitude toward the temple and the priesthood and gives a glowing description of Simon, the Oniad high priest (50:1–24). Its hope is completely this worldly and has a political and nationalistic coloring. Sirach represents the tension at the time between political involvement in protest against the liberal aristocracy and the traditional caution of the wise, who counseled subjection to the powerful. Sirach also contains an echo of the prophets. It is concerned about the opposition between rich and poor (13:2–5, 15–20) and is especially critical of merchants (26:29–27:3). In opposition to the teaching of determinism, Sirach emphasizes the freedom of the will and holds firmly to the doctrine of divine retribution.

The book was translated from Hebrew into Greek by Ben Sira's grandson after 132 B.C. The title Ecclesiasticus comes from the Vulgate, though it has been used in the Western church since Cyprian (248–258). This title may have been pinned on the book because of its similarity to Ecclesiastes. Rufinus (345–410) explained that it means *The Church's Book*.



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Baruch. Baruch purports to be a letter written by Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe (Jer 32:12; 36:4), and sent to Jerusalem to be read at a festival. Actually, the book is a composite of three works, each probably coming from a different author. The three parts probably were compiled between 200 and 100 B.C.

The first part serves as a prose introduction and recites Israel's sins. The second part is a poem on wisdom that bears no relation to the first part except the presumed setting in the exile. The third part is a poem written in a different style that gives a comforting reply to the first two parts. The author drew from Isaiah 40–66 and looked forward to an imminent deliverance of the Jews and a return to Jerusalem.

The Letter of Jeremiah. The Letter of Jeremiah purports to be a letter sent by Jeremiah to those who were about to be carried into exile in Babylon. It is a treatise on the folly of idolatry which dates from the Hellenistic or Maccabean period. The earliest fragment of the letter, dating about 100 B.C., was discovered in Cave 7 at Qumran. Its style is elevated and rhetorical. Following each of its various proofs of the powerlessness of idols, its frequently repeated refrain declares, "This shows that they are no gods."

Additions to Daniel. Both the original language and the date of these legendary additions are debated, though the first has the greatest likelihood of having been written in Hebrew. The additions are saturated with Jewish piety, and they are theologically inoffensive. Other than the assumption that the additions were recognized as additions, and Susanna casts the elders in a bad light, it is unclear why the additions were not accepted as part of the Hebrew canon. The common theme of the additions is how faithful Jews who trusted in the Lord even while in exile in Babylon were delivered from certain death.

Although fragmentary copies of Daniel containing the additions were discovered at Qumran, the additions were not widely attested. Josephus told other apocryphal stories about Daniel, but not these. The Talmud does not refer to them, and Jerome said that he knew of no Semitic text of the additions.

The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men. This work describes the furnace that the three young men were thrown into. Azariah is the Hebrew name of Abednego. The song of the three young men contains both a liturgy addressed to God and an appeal to the whole creation to join in the praise of God.

Susanna. Susanna is a detective story that may have been composed late in the Persian period. Two elders attempted to ravish the beautiful and innocent Susanna (whose name means *a lily*). When she cried out, the elders accused her of having lain with a young man. God heard her pleas and raised up Daniel (whose name means *God has judged*). Daniel interrogated the two elders separately and showed that their stories did not agree with each other. They were both lying.

The death of Eleazar (from the Apocrypha, 1 Macc 6:43, 46)

Bel and the Dragon. Bel and the Dragon contains two stories that unmask the impotence of foreign idols. The first is another detective story, though more contrived and less appealing than Susanna. Bel, the Babylonian deity, consumed quantities of food and drink each night. Daniel devised a plan that revealed to all that the priests were slipping into the temple at night to consume the offerings. In the second story Daniel killed a dragon by feeding it a concoction of pitch, fat, and hair. The dragon ate them and burst open. The priests were enraged and had Daniel thrown into the lion's den. The prophet Habakkuk was transported to Babylon to provide for Daniel. The king released Daniel from the lion's den and threw his accusers to the lions, who immediately devoured them.

The Prayer of Manasseh. Manasseh's prayer is a beautiful, penitential prayer of one who had fallen into idolatry. It purports to be the prayer of Manasseh referred to in 2 Chronicles 33:11–13, 18–19. There is very little evidence by which to date this prayer. It is a Jewish composition, but verses 7b and 15b have at times been regarded as Christian additions. The Prayer was not in the Septuagint known to Origen or Jerome. It is first attested after A.D. 200 in the Syriac Didascalia and in the later Apostolic Constitutions. It has appeared in the Septuagint since about A.D. 400 in the odes appended to the Psalms. It was subsequently placed in the appendix to the Vulgate at the Council of Trent.

First Maccabees. First Maccabees is a historical writing that records the history of the Jews from the beginning of Antiochus Epiphanes' reign (175 B.C.) to the reign of John Hyrcanus I (134 B.C.). It was written in Hebrew in a style similar to that of the Books of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament. The Hebrew original was known to Josephus, Origen, and Jerome but was subsequently lost. First Maccabees survives in a Greek translation and in other versions. This history of the Maccabean revolt was written, probably in Jerusalem, sometime between the death of John Hyrcanus I in 104 B.C. and the Roman conquest under Pompey (63 B.C.).



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The apparent purpose of the work was to establish the legitimacy of the Hasmonean Dynasty, just as the books of Samuel proved the legitimacy of the Davidic Dynasty. Although the author attributed the Maccabean victories to divine Providence, he did not record any miraculous interventions.

Second Maccabees. Second Maccabees was not written by the author of 1 Maccabees and differs sharply in character and purpose. Second Maccabees is an abridgment of a five-volume history written by Jason of Cyrene. Both Jason's history and 2 Maccabees were composed in Greek. Jason's work can be dated to about 100 B.C., and 2 Maccabees can be dated sometime later in the same century.

Second Maccabees is generally less reliable than 1 Maccabees as a source for historical information. The sequence of events differs in the two accounts. For example, 1 Maccabees places the death of Antiochus Epiphanes after the dedication of the temple, while 2 Maccabees places it before that event. Second Maccabees covers the period from the high priesthood of Onias III to the defeat of Nicanor's army (180 to 161 B.C.), the period covered by 1 Maccabees 1:10–7:50. The author of 2 Maccabees interpreted history theologically and sought to show that the claims of the Hasmoneans after the death of Judas were illegitimate. Second Maccabees, however, vindicates Daniel and exalts the Oniads.

Second Maccabees reports angelic interventions and affirms the resurrection of the dead and the doctrine of creation from nothing (7:28). Second Maccabees also teaches that the dead intercede for the living (15:11–16) and that the living may pray and offer sacrifices for the dead (12:43–45).

Third Maccabees. Third Maccabees has nothing to do with 1 or 2 Maccabees. Indeed it deals not with the Maccabean period but with the deliverance of faithful Jews in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–203 B.C.).

According to 3 Maccabees, Ptolemy IV attempted to enter the holy of holies in the temple after his victory at Raphia (217 B.C.). God prevented him from doing so by striking him with paralysis. Ptolemy was angered by the Jews because they would not open their temple to him and resolved to kill all Jews who would not submit to initiation into the Dionysiac cult. He ordered drunken elephants to be readied so that they could be released on the captive Jews. In response to the prayers of the Jews, God sent a deep sleep on Ptolemy, then struck him with forgetfulness, and finally sent two angels who were invisible to the Jews to turn the elephants on the Egyptians. As a result of the rout, Ptolemy granted the Jews their freedom, and the Jews declared a festival that would be observed each year.

Third Maccabees—like Esther—explains the origin of a festival. It was written in a florid, bombastic style and dates from between 100 and 1 B.C. While this book was not included in the Latin Vulgate, it has been regarded as scripture by the Eastern churches.

Fourth Maccabees. Fourth Maccabees is a philosophical treatise. Its theme is that reason is the mistress of the emotions. Actually, however, the author used the form and theme merely as a way in which to present Jewish piety in the guise of a philosophical address. The writer exhorted Jews to remain resolutely faithful to the law and to their ancestral faith. The power of reason dictates that one should obey the law.

The body of the work deals with the martyrdom of Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother (2 Macc 6:12–7:42). The writer argued that they were able to uphold the law and meet death courageously because they were guided by reason. Once titled "On the Supremacy of Reason," the book is now called 4 Maccabees because it is based on the martyrologies of 2 Maccabees 6–7.

The origin of the book is difficult to locate. It is dated between 100 B.C. and A.D. 100. It is traced variously to Alexandria or Antioch. The Greek form of the book and its thoroughly Jewish content show that form and content did not always correspond in works of this period. Its theme, the supremacy of reason, is also a favorite Stoic theme. Nevertheless, 4 Maccabees maintains that martyrdom atones for the sins of Israel and teaches that martyrs receive blessing and everlasting life. The wicked, on the other hand, suffer eternal punishment.

Psalm 151. Psalm 151 was included among the psalms of David in the Septuagint and by the scribe of Codex Sinaiticus. A longer form of the psalm was also found on a scroll from Qumran Cave 11 that contains about thirty-five canonical psalms and several noncanonical psalms. Most other manuscripts, however, exclude this psalm. The psalm celebrates David's youth and his victory over Goliath.

The Pseudepigrapha

The definition and limits of the Pseudepigrapha are even more problematic than those of the Apocrypha. Literally, the term *pseudepigrapha* means *falsely attributed*, or *attributed to a fictitious writer*.

R. H. Charles published an English translation of the Pseudepigrapha in 1913 that included seventeen works. Two of them clearly do not belong with the Pseudepigrapha (Pirke Aboth and the Fragments of a Zadokite document). By common agreement the sectarian works among the Qumran scrolls do not belong to the



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Pseudepigrapha. The rabbinic materials also have been kept separate. The recent English translation of the Pseudepigrapha edited by James H. Charlesworth contains fifty-two books. Charlesworth adopted five criteria for identifying Pseudepigrapha:

1. The work must be, at least partially and preferably totally, Jewish or Jewish-Christian.
2. It should date from the period 200 B.C. to A.D. 200.
3. It should claim to be inspired.
4. It should be related in form or content to the Old Testament.
5. It should ideally be attributed to an Old Testament figure.

Most of these works were preserved through the centuries by groups on the fringe of Christianity. Hence they have come down to us in such languages as Slavonic, Ethiopic, Syriac, Georgian, Coptic, and Armenian. Among the principal works of the Pseudepigrapha are the following: The Letter of Aristeas, Jubilees, the Martyrdom of Isaiah, the Psalms of Solomon, 4 Maccabees, the Sybilline Oracles, 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, the Assumption of Moses, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, 3 Baruch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and the Books of Adam and Eve.

The Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem is the museum that houses the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the caves of Qumran.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The designation “Dead Sea Scrolls” is commonly used to refer to the scrolls found in thirteen caves near Qumran. Scrolls also have been found at other sites near the Dead Sea, such as Masada and Wadi Murabba’at. Among the scrolls and fragments found at Qumran were canonical works (including parts of every book of the Old Testament except Esther), apocryphal works, eschatological texts (some of which were previously known and some of which were not), haggadic texts (exhortation and instruction), halakic texts (rules, law codes), hymnic texts, liturgical texts, calendrical and astrological texts, florilegia (verses of Scripture from various contexts drawn together to form a new context), commentaries, and prayers.

The first cave containing scrolls was discovered in 1947 by Muhammed ed-Dib, a Ta’mireh shepherd. It contained the great Isaiah scrolls and some of the most important sectarian texts (the Manual of Discipline, the Hymn Scroll, and the War Scroll). For the next ten years desert-dwelling Arabs continued to find and sell scrolls through middlemen. Archaeologists combed the area searching for new caves, and the settlement at Qumran was excavated.

By 1960 the fragments had been pieced together, and the writings were identified or named. The principal scrolls had been purchased by Israel, and scholarly judgment identified Qumran as the center of an Essene community which had produced the sectarian writings and most of the other texts found in the area. Although Josephus, Philo, Pliny, and Hippolytus refer to the Essenes, little was known about their beliefs and practices until the discovery of the scrolls.

The archaeological data revealed that Qumran was an Israelite fortress from sometime between 800 and 600 B.C. that was resettled around 140 to 130 B.C. The settlement experienced a period of significant growth and acquired its definitive form about 100 B.C. An earthquake partially destroyed Qumran in 31 B.C., but the settlers rebuilt the community after a brief period of abandonment. A century later the community was finally destroyed and burned in A.D. 68, probably by the tenth Roman Legion. The cemetery nearby contains about eleven hundred tombs. Only males were buried in the main part of the cemetery. An extension contains the remains of a few females and children. At its height, therefore, the Qumran occupation probably had no more than two hundred inhabitants.

The Manual of Discipline (1QS), a composite work dating about 100 B.C., contains a description of the purpose and ideals of the community, its ceremony of admission, the annual census, instruction on the two Spirits, regulations for the community, and a hymn. The earliest material in this document (1QS 8:1–16a and 9:3–10:8a) is widely regarded as the manifesto for the community written prior to the foundation of Qumran.

Two manuscripts dating from the 900s and 1100s A.D. were discovered in a Cairo Geniza (*storeroom for discarded copies of Scripture*) in 1896–97. They contained sections of what is now known as the Damascus Document (CD), eight copies of which were discovered at Qumran. It is a composite document written between the death of the Teacher of Righteousness and the Roman conquest in 63 B.C. The writer alluded to various events in the history of Israel up to the founding of the Qumran community and drew encouragement from these events. Other sections contain laws to be observed by those who live in the camps. These laws differ from the laws contained in the Manual of Discipline, which may indicate either that they were written at a later time or that they applied to the camps rather than to the main community at Qumran.



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The Hymn Scroll (1QH) is a collection of hymns or thanksgiving psalms. In many ways it is reminiscent of the Book of Psalms and draws heavily from Old Testament imagery. The scroll dates from A.D. 1 to 50 and was written by three scribes. The date of the composition of these hymns is unknown. Six other manuscripts of the hymns were found in Cave 4. Various scholars have suggested that some of the hymns were written by the Teacher of Righteousness; others are regarded as “community hymns.”

Above is a reproduction of one of the columns of “The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness,” one of the sectarian scrolls found in the library at Qumran.

Five fragments of the War scroll (1QM) were found in Cave 4. The work purports to give the plan of the final war in which God will crush the forces of evil. The scroll blends holy war traditions (Num 2:1–5:4), apocalyptic imagery, military terminology and strategy, and liturgical and theological pronouncements. All extant copies date from between A.D. 1 and 100, but the document was probably composed sometime after 50 B.C.

The commentaries, or *pesharim*, are marked by a peculiar form of interpretation. The message of the Old Testament prophets was interpreted verse by verse and applied to the history, life, or hope of the Qumran community. Thus the prophets wrote not about their own times but about the Qumran community, which saw itself as living at the end of time. References in the prophets were therefore interpreted allegorically and applied to the community.

The Temple Scroll, the largest of the scrolls, was acquired by Yigael Yadin in 1967. The entire scroll presents its contents as the revealed word of God. Most distinctively, Scripture quotations were changed to the first person. The lost beginning probably dealt with the covenant of Moses on Mount Sinai. The scroll described the messianic temple rather than the existing temple. It strongly argued against practices at the Jerusalem temple. As its name implies, the Temple Scroll described the temple building and moved outward. Related laws were recorded after the description of each installation.

The Qumran scrolls have shed a great deal of light on the life and practices of the Essenes in the first century, thereby revealing even more of the richness and diversity of Jewish life during the New Testament period.

Philo

Philo (about 20 B.C. to A.D. 50) was the most prolific author of Hellenistic Judaism. Philo was a statesman and a philosopher. The only dateable event in his life is a trip to Rome in A.D. 40 when he led an embassy to Gaius. Philo was born into one of the leading families in Alexandria, and his writings defend and interpret Judaism by interpreting Jewish thought in terms of Greek philosophy. His writings are variously mystical, allegorical, homiletical, and didactic. While the New Testament writers never quote Philo, his writings illuminate the larger cultural and philosophical context in which John’s Logos Christology emerged. References in Paul’s Letters and in Hebrews can also be illuminated by reading Philo.

Josephus

The historian Flavius Josephus is the primary source for much of what we know of the history of the Jewish people during the intertestamental and New Testament periods. He was born in a priestly family in A.D. 37/38 and died about 100. Early in the revolt of 66–70, Josephus was placed in command of Jewish forces in Galilee. In 67 he was captured by the Roman general Vespasian at Jotapata. Thereafter Josephus aided the Romans and prophesied that Vespasian would become the Roman emperor. When the prophecy came true, Vespasian released Josephus and allowed him to spend the rest of his life in Rome, where he produced four major works that interpreted recent events for his fellow Jews and portrayed Judaism in a positive light for Greco-Roman readers.

The Jewish War is an account of the Jewish revolt, written within a decade of the revolt. Josephus placed the blame for the war not on the nation as a whole but on misguided revolutionaries. He further counseled other Jews to accept Roman authority.

The Antiquities of the Jews records the history of the Jewish people up to the war of A.D. 66–70. The first part summarizes and paraphrases the biblical record. The latter part provides a detailed history of the Jews during the intertestamental period.

Against Apion refuted slanders against the Jews, and *Life* is a brief autobiographical account, principally of Josephus’s activities in Galilee during the war.

The Mishnah and Talmud

The Mishnah and Talmud are the principal collections of rabbinic scholarship. The Mishnah is a collection of the oral tradition of the rabbis, written about A.D. 200 by Rabbi Judah the Priest. Rabbinic laws are organized in sixty-three tractates and six orders. The commentary (Gemara), additions, and interpretations of the Mishnah were collected



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in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds that date from about A.D. 550 and 450, respectively. The laws deal with agriculture, feasts, women, and damages, and sacrifices. The Babylonian Talmud is the more extensive and became the standard authority for most of Judaism in the succeeding centuries.

Sources for Additional Study

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Eph. 1:15-23

Thanksgiving and Prayer

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

The Value of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

Because the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha were composed centuries (and sometimes even millennia) after the lives of the Old Testament characters and events that figure in them, it is highly unlikely that they preserve any significant information about the periods they purport to describe. **Their main value is therefore in the evidence they give about the time period in which they were written, not the periods they claim to describe.**

The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha provide information about the history, culture, religious life, literature, hermeneutics, and theology of the period of time between the writings of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament Apocrypha and the writing of the Christian Scriptures, as well as the first couple Christian centuries. They often reflect theological developments in Second Temple Judaism that illuminate the Jewish viewpoints seen in the New Testament.

Value for Understanding Early Judaism

The time between the last events described in the Hebrew Bible and the birth of Jesus is often called the intertestamental period, because for Protestants, it is the period between the Old and New Testaments, although the Old Testament Apocrypha represents a large portion of this period. The intertestamental period spans from about the fourth century BC to the beginning of the first century AD. ~~During the intertestamental period, Judaism was undergoing changes as the Jewish people transitioned from Persian rule (539 BC–331 BC), to Greek rule (331 BC–167 BC), to Jewish self-rule within the Roman Empire (167 BC–63 BC), to assimilation under the Roman Empire (which began in 63 BC).~~

These factors contributed to Judaism's transition from what is known as early Judaism (beginning under Persian rule), where the temple played a predominant role, to rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, along with some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, provide information on how Jewish belief (at least for some within Judaism) was changing and adapting. The coverage of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls are especially applicable for the final stages of this adaptation while the temple was still standing (ca. 150 BC to AD 69 [Old Testament Pseudepigrapha]; ca. 250 BC to AD 50 [Dead Sea Scrolls]); these final stages are not covered in the Old Testament Apocrypha. The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha also provides insight into the period shortly thereafter (ca. AD 70 to 200).

While Jews during the intertestamental period produced an abundance of literature, only a small amount has survived, making parts of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha a significant body of literature, preserving information otherwise lost. The Pseudepigrapha are an important source for understanding the religious life of early Judaism in that they (Charlesworth, *OTP* 1, xxvii–xxix):

- Confirm the influence of the books of the Old Testament on early Judaism.

¹⁰ Dockery, D. S. (Ed.). (1992). [Holman Bible Handbook](#) (pp. 504–535). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.



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- ~~Show that despite being repeatedly conquered and ruled by other nations, the Jewish people continued to be zealous for their religion—even under persecution.~~
- Reveal that early Judaism was not entirely uniform, nor was it as diverse as is often assumed.

The Pseudepigrapha also elaborate on Old Testament themes, concepts, and customs, and provides insight into how Jewish communities handled Scripture. The modern understanding of what Judaism looked like in the Second Temple Period could not have been developed without the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.

Value for New Testament Scholarship

Parts of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha are important for New Testament scholarship. The New Testament was not written in isolation from the history, literature, and culture of its time, but instead draws on many cultural concepts common in Judaism of the time. And it is Judaism of the period that is often reflected in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. This is seen especially in the Letter of Jude. Jude contains references to one or two writings from the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: *1 Enoch* is quoted in Jude 14–15, while Jude 9 refers to an extrabiblical tradition that may have been contained in the lost ending of the *Testament of Moses*.¹¹

¹¹ Rachel Klippenstein, J. D. B., & III, E. J. H. (2016). [Pseudepigrapha, Old Testament](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.