

The Power of Jesus

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Because we are Christians, our faith is founded on the word of God. We believe that the word is an accurate historical record, particularly of events that occurred during the ministry of Jesus. As we saw in several lessons last year, we have good reason to believe that. The evidence supports the idea that the gospels are accounts written within a few decades of the events they chronicle and that they are based on eyewitness testimony. They look like good history.

If, then, the Scripture is a faithful retelling of actual events, it is the best way for us to figure out who the actual historical Jesus was. Throughout His ministry, Jesus claimed to be more than just a good man. This is not true, for instance, of John the Baptist. John claimed to be a prophet, but he never claimed to work miracles to confirm his message, and he outright denied that he was the Messiah. Jesus also claimed to be a prophet, but unlike John, He asserted that He did perform miraculous signs as evidence of His divine origin, and He openly declared Himself to be the Christ.

This means that one of three things must be true of Jesus. First, He could have been a lunatic who mistakenly believed that He was the Son of God, like many mentally ill people today claim to be Jesus. Second, He could have been a liar, a con man, another type that is all too familiar to us today. Third, He could have been the Messiah He claimed to be.

The best way to determine which of these possibilities is most likely is to examine the record of the miracles of Jesus. Does this record reveal a madman who coincidentally happened to be around when strange events took place? Does it show the fingerprints of a clever stage magician, who with his followers was able to manipulate a credulous public? Or does it show Jesus to be what He claimed to be, the Son of God? Only the third possibility gives us reason to believe in Him at all, to accept that He did indeed die for our sins. Let's think about this as we look at the power of Jesus.

The Great Catch of Fish

As we consider this subject, we're going to look in particular at three miracles and what they reveal about the authenticity of Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. The first miracle is the miracle of the great catch of fish. We see it recorded in Luke 5:1-7. There are several points here to which we need to pay attention. First of all, this is one of the many miracles of Jesus that occurred in the public eye. Jesus has attracted a crowd by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and they're crowding around Him so tightly that he commandeers Peter's boat as a kind of floating pulpit. It is immediately after Jesus finishes teaching that he tells Peter to lower his nets to catch some fish. The crowd would have heard this exchange, they would have seen that Peter and James and John didn't have any fish in their boats when they put out from shore, and they would have seen the boats come wallowing back in, groaning beneath all the fish they caught. In other words, there were plenty of witnesses to the main events of the story, from disciples probably all the way to Pharisees.

That takes us to the second question, then. If these events occurred publicly as the Bible presents them, is there any other explanation for what took place than a miracle? Here, as for all the rest of the signs we'll look at this morning, we can't explain it away by hypothesizing that Jesus was a madman. Something happened here, and somebody had to do something that made it happen. Could the miracle of the great catch have been faked? I'm a pretty cynical guy, but I don't see how. It was evident to everyone involved that the fishermen suddenly went from having no fish to having more fish than their boats could handle. It's not like Peter had some fish-storage pen out in the middle of the lake that he could pull fish out of to make Jesus look good. Furthermore, at this stage of the gospel, why would Peter collude with Jesus like that? Peter has had some contact with Jesus, but he's not a full-time disciple.

Finally, could this be coincidence, that Peter, the professional fisherman, had failed to catch fish all night long, and Jesus, the carpenter's son, happened to glance over the side of the boat and see a giant school of fish that the professional fisherman hadn't spotted? That's probably the best explanation for those who refuse to accept the miracle, but it strains credulity. Peter hadn't been fishing all night because he was a night owl; he had fished all night so that the fish wouldn't see his boat and his net coming. In other words, to reject the miracle, we have to believe not just that Peter got dumb. We have to believe that the fish got dumb too and meekly volunteered to be caught in numbers that none of these professional fishermen had ever seen before. After all of those mental gymnastics, doesn't it make more sense to accept that the supernatural power of Jesus was responsible for the haul? That's where the Scripture leads us.

Feeding the 5000

The next miracle case study we're going to look at is the miracle of feeding the 5000. The account that we're going to use is the one in Matthew, Matthew 14:13-21. There are several points here that reveal the truth about what occurred. First of all, as this account reveals, this entire thing was an improvisation by Jesus. It's not like Jesus rented a convention center beforehand to serve as the location for the miracle. Instead, the opening event in the story is that Jesus attempted to escape the crowds. He went to a desolate location precisely because there weren't any people there and He didn't want any people there. However, people appeared anyway, and Jesus was too compassionate to send them away.

Second, it's quite evident that none of Jesus' disciples expected a miracle to occur. They didn't have the foggiest idea what Jesus was about to do. They were concerned about providing food for the crowds, yes, but their solution was to send the multitude back to the villages where they had come from, so that they could eat at home. When Jesus tells them that they're responsible for feeding the people, they're flabbergasted. They inform Jesus that all they have is five loaves and two fishes. Mark's account of this same miracle reveals that the only way the disciples saw to get food was if they had two hundred denarii, probably about \$20,000 in our terms, to go buy food themselves. These are not people who are waiting for Jesus to produce a rabbit from His hat. Their minds are fixed firmly in the here-and-now.

Third, even if these things weren't true, even if Jesus had been looking for a crowd, even if the apostles had been planning some kind of fraud with Jesus, just how would they have worked the fraud out? Remember, this location is a desolate location, and enough food to feed 5000 men and have twelve baskets left over is A LOT of food. Let's say that each of the 5000 got about a McDonald's Quarter Pounder worth of food, and that a Quarter Pounder is four inches in diameter, two inches high, and weighs six ounces, bun included. 5000 Quarter Pounders would make a stack three and a half feet on a side and eight and a half feet tall, and the stack would weigh nearly a ton. That's just to feed the 5000. It doesn't even take into account the women and children, or even the leftovers. In order for Jesus and His minions to fake the miracle, they would have had to transport all of this food to the desolate location, stash it someplace, and produce it at the appropriate time, all without anyone noticing. All it would take is one nosy kid saying, "Hey! Why do you have enough food to feed thousands of people?", and their cover is blown. Clearly, that kind of con is logistically impossible.

Finally, there were at least 5000 witnesses to the fact that this miracle occurred. I admit that people are gullible and can be induced to believe all kinds of ridiculous things. However, nobody's dumb enough to believe that they just ate a meal when, in fact, they didn't. The crowd on that day knew that they had their bellies filled with something. In fact, they were so convinced of it that many of them continued to follow Jesus around, hoping for another free meal. So . . . where did the first meal come from? Did Jesus produce it through some scheme so convoluted that we can't even imagine how He did it, or did He produce that food by the power of God? Only the second option makes sense.

Healing the Paralytic

The third miracle that we're going to consider is the healing of the paralytic. This time, we're going to lean on Mark's account, which appears in Mark 2:1-12. Just as was true with feeding the 5000, the lead-up to this miracle reveals not Jesus the publicity-seeker, but Jesus the publicity-dodger. Even as early in His ministry as Mark 1, Jesus has been forced out into the countryside by the crowds who mob Him anytime He sets foot in a city. At this point in time, Jesus still owns His own home, and He returns home, probably hoping for some time to relax, but it is not to be. Instead, the word gets around that He is there, and people come from all over to see Him. His house is filled with people, the doorway of the house is filled with people, and most likely, the area around the house is filled with people too. If they had had fire marshals back then, I would guess that they wouldn't have been too happy with Jesus. However, Jesus probably wasn't too happy with the crowd, either. There are times in Scripture when He seeks a crowd. This isn't one of them.

Second, the behavior of the paralytic and his friends doesn't sound like they're helping perpetrate a fraud. Today, all kinds of charismatic preachers use ringers for their so-called miracles of healing. They plant perfectly healthy people in the audience who then claim to have some serious illness so that the faith healer can "heal" them. These fake sick people are almost always prominently positioned in the church building, sitting in the front row in a wheelchair or something, so that everybody there can have a long time to accept that the ringer is a genuine cripple. They certainly don't start out with the ringer on the edge of the crowd. They don't set up things so badly that the ringer's friends have to cut a hole in the faith healer's roof to bring him to the faith healer's attention. Why go to all that trouble? However, that's what we see happening in the case of this paralytic. That doesn't look like the paralytic and his friends are in on it. That looks like they are exactly what they claim to be—a genuinely ailing man and his friends, who arrive too late to get a good spot and are reduced to burrowing through Jesus' roof to bring their friend to the attention of the prophet.

Third, we see the reaction of all the witnesses to the miracle. As is usually the case in the gospels, at least some of these witnesses are probably enemies of Jesus. The Pharisees were always interested in what Jesus was up to. However, everyone comes away from the encounter convinced that a paralyzed man has just been given the ability to walk. The most likely explanation for this is that the witnesses knew the man beforehand and knew that he was paralyzed. Remember, the paralyzed man was carried to Jesus by his friends. That's not a practical mode of transportation for more than a mile or two. This guy isn't a stranger to the crowd. He's a neighbor. Even those who didn't know him personally would have been informed by those who did. When he is healed, no one questions what has happened.

Ultimately, though, it is Jesus who explains the relevance of this miracle to us. It demonstrates that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins. I don't know what salvation looks like. I've never seen it, and neither has anyone else. However, thousands of people saw Jesus produce boatfuls of fish, feed a multitude from one boy's lunch, and heal men who could not walk. If Jesus can work such wonders in the earthly realm, then we should believe Him when He says He works wonders in the spiritual realm too. Let's think about this assurance of our salvation as we eat the Lord's Supper.