

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Synoptic Gospels,

Lecture 11, Miracles Exegesis

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Okay, we're continuing with our Synoptic Gospels course. We've looked at, so far, eight of our twelve units, if you like. Historical Jesus, Jewish Background, Introduction to Exegesis and Narratives, Authorship and Date of the Synoptics, Exegeting Parables, Gospels, Literary Works, Synoptic Problem, Geography of Palestine and Jerusalem.

We have four more to go, and this morning, we're going to be looking at Miracle Accounts and Exegeting Miracle Accounts, and I want to say a word or two here about the genre. The genre, Miracle Story, the definition of that kind of genre would be a narrative focusing on a miracle as its main feature. The usual features of this genre, besides those of a narrative, obviously it is a type of narrative, is that in order for the person to tell this in an efficient, convenient way, the problem would be narrated, then the request for help, then the actions of the miracle worker, and finally the result, and that might be healing or deliverance or such, might be a response of the spectators or such, or it might be in the response of the demon if it involves demonization of some sort.

The function of miracle accounts in the Gospels, one of the major features, I think, is that the person of Jesus is seen through his actions, and we see that indicated several places, did many other things, but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah and have life in his name, etc. They also indicate the redemptive activity of God as well. There are lots of miracles in the Synoptic Gospels, probably roughly the same order of magnitude for the number of miracles as there is for a number of parables in the Gospel.

I've categorized the miracles under healings, nature miracles, and resurrections, and so here is the list. I've got a man with leprosy narrated in Matthew 8 Mark 1 and Luke 5, the centurion's servant narrated in Matthew 8 and Luke 7, Peter's mother-in-law narrated in Matthew 8 Mark 1 and Luke 4, the Gadarene demoniacs narrated in Matthew 8 Mark 5 and Luke 8, the paralyzed man in Matthew 9 Mark 2 and Luke 5, the woman with the bleeding in Matthew 9 Mark 5 and Luke 8, two blind men just narrated in Matthew 9, and the man who is mute and also possessed in Matthew 9, the man with a shriveled hand in Matthew 12 Mark 3 and Luke 6, and the man who is blind, mute, and possessed in Matthew 12 and Luke 11. Then there's the Canaanite woman's daughter narrated in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, the boy with a demon in Matthew 17 Mark 9 and Luke 9, and then the two blind men narrated in Matthew 20 Mark 10 and Luke 18.

All of them in Matthew are healings. Then the deaf-mute in Mark 7, the man possessed in the synagogue in Mark 1 and Luke 4, the blind man at Bethsaida in Mark

8, the crippled woman in Luke 13, the man with dropsy in Luke 14, the ten lepers in Luke 17, high priest servant, his ear healed in Luke 22, and then put in the official son in John 4, and the sick man at Bethesda in John 5. Those would be the healing miracles, nature miracles, the calming of the storm in Matthew 8 Mark 4 and Luke 8, the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14 Mark 6 Luke 9, the walking on the water in Matthew 14 and Mark 6, feeding the four thousand in Matthew 15 and Mark 8, the coin in the fish's mouth in Matthew 17, fig tree withered Matthew 21 and Mark 11, and then just in Luke, the catch of fish in Luke 5 and turning water into wine in John 2, and another catch of fish in John 21, and then resurrections, not counting Jesus' resurrection, Jairus' daughter raised in Matthew 9 Mark 5 and Luke 8, and then the widow of Nain's son in Luke 7, and then Lazarus in John 11, 1 through 44. For our sample, a miracle we're going to look at for exegesis here, we'll look at the miracle of the demons and the pigs as found in Mark 5, 1 through 20.

This is my translation here, and they, this would be Jesus and the disciples, who went to the other side of the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. There are several variant readings there with diverse support in each of the synoptic Gospels. In Mark, it looks like the better support is Gerasenes, and when he gets out of the boat, he immediately meets him from the tombs, a man with an unclean spirit. The man had his home among the tombs, and not even with a chain was anyone any longer able to bind him, for he had been bound many times with fetters and chains, but the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the fetters broken, and no one was able to subdue him.

So continually, night and day, he was in the tombs and the hills, crying out and beating himself with stones, and when he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell at his feet, and crying out with a loud voice, he said, Why are you bothering me, Jesus, Son of God, most high? I adjure you by God. Do not torment me. For Jesus was saying to him, Come out of the man, you unclean spirit.

And he, that is Jesus, asked him, What is your name? And he said to him, My name is Legion because we are many. And he begged him strongly not to send them out of the region. Now, there was a large herd of pigs feeding there on the mountain.

So, they begged him, saying, Send us to the pigs, that we may enter into them. And he permitted them. And the unclean spirits went out of the man and entered into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the slope into the lake, about two thousand of them, and they drowned in the sea.

Their herdsmen fled and told the story in the city and in the country, and they, the people of these places, came to see what had happened. And they came to Jesus, and they saw the demoniac sitting, dressed insantly, the one who had had the legion, and they became afraid. And the ones who had seen it told them what had

happened to the demoniac and to the pigs, and they began to beg him to depart from their area, as begged Jesus.

And while he was getting into the boat, the former demoniac begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus would not allow him. He said to him, Go home to your people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how much he had mercy on you.

He went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and all were amazed. Well, that's a translation of the passage. I didn't really deal with some of the grammatical features lurking there, but we'll let them ride for here.

A little bit about the geography. The location of this miracle is somewhat complicated by the variant readings for the region given in verse 1. We get Gerasenes, region of the Gerasenes, regions of the Gadarenes, regions of the Gergesenes. And those are all terms referring to the inhabitants, and correspond to the town names Garasa, Gadara, and Gergesa.

And those are all towns in that region. Two of them are the big Decapolis cities, Gadara and Garasa, and the other appears to be the name of a village, which still is known as Kursi, right in the kind of, well, see, Galilee doesn't quite have corners, but it's over in the kind of northeast edge of the sea. If one looks at a historical map of the area, say the map in the front paper of the UBS Greek New Testament, Garasa is a full 35 miles southeast of the lake.

Gadara is about 5 miles southeast of the lake, across a deep gorge, and Gergesa is thought to be near the lake, somewhere north of the middle of the east side, and is, as I said just a moment ago, we think the village Kursi today. Garasa and Gadara, as I said, were large towns, two of the ten cities of the Decapolis. Gergesa was probably small.

The location would seem to favor Gergesa as the site, except that it appears that the Decapolis cities had fishing and docking rights on the lake. Notice the text says region of the Gergesenes in all three Gospels, rather than region of Garasa, or something of that sort. We now know that there are still ruins of ancient docks at various places on the east side of the lake.

The lake a few years ago was unusually low, and some of this material showed up. As far as geography is concerned, there's a steep slope running down close to the shore, both near Gergesa, and also down on the southeast end of the lake, which might have been the fishing territory for either Garasa or Gadara. So either location is possible.

You obviously need something with a fairly steep slope for the peaks to run down. So, a little bit about geography. What we might say is two candidates.

The traditional one is the one in the northeast side of the lake. Demons. Belief in demons is generally rejected in Western secular culture but is very widespread in traditional cultures throughout the world.

The Bible is quite specific about their existence, though it says little about what they are. The standard idea is that they're fallen angels of some sort, but that's basically because we know almost nothing about the unseen world, and so we tend to simplify things. But we've got various hints that the unseen world is probably as complicated as ours, so we tend to lump the seraphim and cherubim as angels, and we don't really know for sure.

So, we'll probably leave it at that point. The Bible is quite clear and quite specific on their existence, but it says little about what they are, nor where they came from, and such. There are no clear examples of demon possession in the Old Testament, but Saul is harassed by an evil spirit in 1 Samuel 16.

In 1 Kings 22, Ahab's prophets are misled by a deceiving spirit. The incident of the sons of God and daughters of men in Genesis 6 may be demonic. Demons are referred to in connection with false worship in Deuteronomy 32.17 and Psalm 106.37. By contrast, demon possession is mentioned frequently in the Gospels and once or twice in the Acts.

The presence of demons in a narrative complicates its interpretation, as we cannot always tell who is acting. Is it the person who is demonized, or on his own initiative, or is it the demons controlling his activities? In our passage, is it the demoniac or the demons? Is it the pigs or the demons? This reminds us again that there is a great deal that we do not know about the unseen world. Think a little about the features of this passage as a miracle account.

The problem is narrated. The demoniac is introduced by, actually, for a 20-verse passage, a fairly extensive description. Of his malady and the effects it's had on his life.

Request for help. In this particular case, it's not clear that there is any unless the initial movement of the man toward Jesus is a result of his initiative rather than that of the demons. Imagine some kind of scenario in which he can hear the demons talking in his head, etc.

And one of them says, Look, there is Jesus or something of that sort. And the demoniac figures, It's now or never, and starts off running towards Jesus. But we can

also imagine other phenomena where the demons just are saying, Look, here's a group coming ashore.

We'll get them and come charging down there and don't realize until they get very close that one of them is Jesus. So, I don't know whether we've got a request for help here in our particular account. Actions of the miracle worker.

Well, Jesus speaks with the demons and allows them to go into the pigs. The result, the man is delivered. The pigs are drowned.

We're not sure of the response of the demons. Do they drive the pigs into the water to get rid of Jesus? Does Jesus drive the pigs into the water to get rid of the demons? Or do the pigs panic and commit suicide? It's one of the complications where you just see what happened outside here, and you don't know what's going on inside the demoniac or the pigs. The response of the spectators is fairly straightforward.

The pig herders run to the village. You get the impression they're not the owners. And probably, they run there to get their story in first.

Make sure that the initial impression is that they're not responsible. When they get there, the spectators are fearful and want Jesus to leave. Fear in the presence of the supernatural is, of course, a common phenomenon throughout human history.

We see that very much in the Gospel accounts, Bible accounts, and external materials. The former demoniac wants to accompany Jesus. So, those are some of the features of the passage as a miracle account.

But it's also a narrative, huh? So, we've got the standard features of narrative—actors or characters, events and actions, scenes, plot, etc. Well, the chief character, obviously, is Jesus.

Then the demoniac, and we're not sure what his action is until he's healed in the sense of what's on his own initiative. The demons converse with Jesus and they act as a group. The pig herders don't speak.

They're not narrated in their speaking, but they head off for the village. The disciples are not explicitly identified, but they are probably the major ones who are narrating the events to the villagers when they arrive here a few minutes later. And the villagers act as a group.

Events and actions. Jesus and his disciples arrive at the other side of the lake. Other side as compared with Capernaum.

So, across the top of the lake or even down the whole body of the lake, depending on which of the two sites are right. The demoniac runs to meet Jesus. And then our narrator gives him a side to sketch his background situation.

It is characteristic of introducing a character into an account to say a little bit about who he is, where he came from, or something like that. This is actually rather long since this guy has a rather doleful history if you like. Jesus commands the demons to come out.

And some interesting phenomena here. They resist. And then, rather ironic, they call on God to protect them.

They adjure him by God not to throw them out. The Luke account has thrown them into the abyss. They admit to being a legion.

And a little background there. A legion was a standard army unit in the Roman army. And at full strength was about 6,000 men.

So, presumably, the remark is to indicate we're looking at perhaps thousands of demons in this fellow. They ask for permission to go into the pigs. Jesus permits them.

And the pigs stampede into the lake and drown. Pig herders head for town and return with a crowd. The demoniac, by this time, is now dressed and sane.

When the crowd realizes what has happened, they ask Jesus to leave. He does, but he instructs the former demoniac to tell others what God has done for him. Then, we're told that the demoniac tells the story throughout Decapolis.

The scenes, there's just one. It all takes place at the lakeside, except for the closing statement that tells you what the demoniac went off and did. Plot.

It's not really complicated. Jesus rescues a man from a mob of demons, and the incidents provide some insight into human nature, demonic nature, and Jesus' nature.

Well, I had my students, and I thought through what was going on here. And we then tried to think about what kind of theological lessons we could get from this miracle. And since miracle accounts typically in the Gospels are intended to tell us something about Jesus, the first thing to ask then is, what does this account tell us about Jesus? Well, the account says he is the son of God, though the source of this particular information is not great.

It's the demons talking. And since they're liars, you don't know whether they're speaking the truth or lying here independently. And doubtlessly, that's part of their purpose.

And that's why Jesus does not encourage the demons to speak: They're going to try to introduce things that will cause trouble. So, one way for a liar to complicate things is to mix up his lies with some truths.

And then people can't tell for sure what he's saying. But in fact, he is the son of God, as we know from elsewhere. And, of course, typically, as we interpret passages in Scripture, we're seeking to interpret them in terms of our knowledge of the whole of Scripture.

This is, after all, why I suggested back earlier in our introduction to exegesis why it's important to read the Bible over and over again until you've got a very good idea of what's in it. And know what's not in it. You can realize that when Jesus says you must be born again, he's not talking about incarnation if you've read the rest of the Bible.

Even though a Hindu or a Buddhist might react that way if that's the only passage they have seen, Jesus is the son of God. He is able to subdue demons by the thousands.

So, even a very large crew like this is not able to resist him in the ultimate sense, if you like. He has compassion for those who are in bondage to Satan. We don't know what this fellow's responsibility was in winding up this way, but it might have been substantial.

But Jesus has compassion upon him. And we see something also important that we see elsewhere in other passages. Jesus will allow people to go their own way also.

So, here, the people want him to leave, and he leaves. There are some hints, particularly with this remark about the Decapolis, that perhaps explain some of the features surrounding the feeding of 4,000 later, which also appears to be over in this area. And that is, after he's given perhaps the former demoniac a few months to do his work, lots of people are ready to listen to him when he comes back again.

Those are some things I saw in the passage regarding Jesus. Regarding demons, the Bible is very clear and this passage is very clear that they exist and that they are dangerous, not just a primitive model for insanity. The question has arisen to my mind: could insanity be a modern disguise for demons? We don't understand everything, and it's not necessary to claim that insanity is only a disguise for demons, but in some cases of it might well be.

It reminds us again that we can't see into the unseen world. These demons can apparently see spiritual realities we cannot see. They somehow know something about Jesus, and presumably, it's by seeing something that they can tell who he is or something of that sort.

These demons are stronger than men or animals, so they're able to control this fellow to a greater or lesser extent. They're able, perhaps, to control the animals as well. It's possible that they can only control one at a time, so that when these demons are less out, there's enough of them to control the pigs, which are said to be about 2,000 of them.

So, don't know, don't know. However, demons are subject to God. We don't live in a universe like the one that the Zoroastrians saw, in which we have two gods of about equal power who fight back and forth.

But God is the one who is over all of his creatures, whether they're in rebellion or not. We have some insight regarding humans as well. We pick this up from the demoniac and the crowds and all of those things and often pick it up from the disciples as well.

In such incidents, I see three things here. People tend to put material things ahead of spiritual things, their own concerns ahead of others. So, here's this great thing that's happened to this fellow: he's delivered, etc.

And there may well have been some people in the crowd who are really excited about that, although it doesn't appear that perhaps his own family is even in the neighborhood anymore. But the major concern of the crowd seems to be about the pigs, and perhaps fear that something else might disastrously happen if Jesus stays around too long, so they want him to leave. People are, in some cases, subject to demons, and we don't know much of the technology of that.

You can find deliverance ministries that will give you lots of details, but how much of that is real, really accurate information is very hard to tell. And we also see that humans can witness God's work in their lives without special theological training. And that is significant here, that instead of keeping this former demoniac with him so that he can learn some more about Jesus or something like that, it's enough for a start that he goes out and tells people what Jesus has done in his own life.

Well, that raises the question then of how might, if we're preaching or if we're teaching a Bible study or Sunday school class or something, how might we preach or teach this particular passage? Well, I suggest some things here. It would be, I think, rather valuable to help our people see that satanic power is real. It's not just a joke about somebody going around in red leotards with a pitchfork; it's not a superstition, and it's not just a metaphor for institutional oppression, which seems to be the

liberal take on this in recent generations that the principalities and powers are various political systems and institutions oppressing other people.

Well, that is one way Satan works, okay, but that's not the only way he works. And Satan is not reducible to merely institutional activities of that sort. We also would be helpful to help people see that we need not fear satanic power, for God is even now in control, but we must flee to Christ for protection and deliverance.

That we are not strong enough, the name it and claim it sort of thing does not work in the sense that we can do that on our own steam if we just have faith enough or something of that sort. If we're really trusting who Jesus is, we're really trusting who God is, and God can give us the power to do it. But he doesn't guarantee that he's going to do it.

He doesn't guarantee that we should go out trying to get into situations, and he should bail us out. That's kind of equivalent to the satanic temptation to Jesus to jump off the temple and let God's angels catch him before he hits the bottom. Our responsibility is to seek to do each day what God wants us to do, be the kind of person he wants us to be, and then if he brings us into circumstances where we face something like this, then depend upon him for whatever deliverance we or somebody else needs and trust in him.

So, in that case, in that sense, we do not need to fear satanic power. We also have a lesson here, I think, that we see in the villagers if you like, and that is to beware of putting off God and preferring to go our own way instead. Rather than have this dangerous Jesus around, we just like him to go away, etc.

because God might just let us have our way, and that would be a disaster for us as well. Something that those of us who are Christians should take to heart from this is that we who are Christians should be able to tell others of what Christ has done for us, starting with what we already know and using the knowledge and abilities that we already have and then seeking to build those up as the Lord gives us the opportunity. So that's my take here on this particular miracle, and we should see then that these miracle accounts, we might say, are specially designed to show us who Jesus is, what he's come to do, to judge sin, to rescue people from Satan and from their own sinfulness, and to restore people to wholeness, if you like, as we see this person restored.

Okay, well, that's our very quick discussion on exegeting miracle accounts. Okay, let me run and get my next set of notes, which is Biblical Theology of the Synoptics.