

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 4

Podcast Audio Overview

Credibility of Miracles

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All right, let's jump right in today. We're tackling miracles, specifically those in the Book of Acts, and we're going to be looking at them through the work of Dr. Craig Keener. Now, he's a leading scholar in the New Testament, and his work here offers a really unique perspective.

He blends historical analysis with modern-day accounts, ones that really defy explanation, you know. Yeah, I mean, miracles are a topic that always seems to spark debate. So how does Dr. Keener approach this? What makes his perspective so different? Well, one of the things that makes his approach so interesting is that he doesn't shy away from the skepticism surrounding miracles, you know, especially in our modern world.

But he presents a ton of evidence, evidence that suggests that we might need to, you know, reconsider our assumptions about what's possible. I like that. He's not just dismissing the skepticism.

He's acknowledging it and saying, hey, let's take a closer look. So where does he start? He begins by diving deep into the historical context of the Book of Acts, and he points out these fascinating parallels between Acts and the Gospel of Luke. Oh, interesting.

What kind of parallels? Well, he suggests that Luke intentionally structured these two works as a pair, kind of like how ancient writers created parallel biographies. For example, you have Jesus' anointing by the Holy Spirit in Luke, and then you have the church being empowered by the Holy Spirit in Acts. I see.

So there's a deliberate connection there. Right. It's not just a coincidence.

It's a literary structure that's aimed at reinforcing key ideas. And we see parallels in other areas too, like the types of miracles performed. Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead, and then we see Peter and Paul doing similar things in Acts.

So it's like a continuation of that same power, that same divine intervention being carried forward. Exactly. And then there are these really striking similarities between the three trials that Jesus faces in Luke and the three trials of Paul in Acts.

It's almost like Luke is creating this tapestry, weaving these two narratives together to give us a more profound picture of the early Christian movement. That's fascinating. But I can already hear some people pushing back on this, saying, isn't this just embellishment? Is Luke just making things up to fit a narrative? Yeah, I think that's a natural question to ask, and Dr. Keener doesn't ignore it.

He argues that these parallels actually point to deeper historical connections. They're not just literary inventions. So how does he support that argument? Well, for instance, he points

out that some of the details that are recorded in Luke, like Jesus' prayer on the cross, " Into your hands I commit my spirit, those details actually align with common Jewish prayers of that era.

Ah, so there's a historical grounding to these accounts. They're not just made up out of thin air. Right.

And that grounding in historical detail lends further credibility to Luke's accounts. Okay, so we're not just talking about literary parallels. We're talking about clues that point to a deeper historical reality.

It's like we're piecing together a puzzle. Exactly. Each detail adds another layer.

And speaking of the bigger picture, Dr. Keener goes beyond just establishing the accuracy of these accounts. He delves into why Luke wrote the Book of Acts in the first place. Oh, that's interesting.

What were his motivations? Well, he suggests that Acts might have actually served as a legal document, like a record of precedents demonstrating that early Christians were innocent in the eyes of Roman law. Wow. Acts as a legal defense.

I never thought of it that way. It's a fascinating angle. And it makes sense if you think about the context.

This could have been a really strategic move to protect believers from persecution and to establish Christianity as legitimate within the Roman Empire. So Luke was thinking strategically here. He wasn't just writing for fellow believers.

He had a broader audience in mind. Exactly. He was engaging with Roman authorities, Greek philosophers, different communities in Asia, Jewish critics.

And throughout this narrative, we see this recurring theme of the gospel message just spreading unhindered. Like an unstoppable force. Yeah.

Despite all the opposition and trials, that message just keeps pushing forward. And this brings us to the heart of what we're diving into here. Miracles, as they're depicted in the Book of Acts.

And Dr. Keener is very upfront about the fact that there's this Western scholarly bias against miracles. A tendency to write them off as legend or psychological phenomena. Right.

But he doesn't just accept that bias. He challenges it head-on. He asks us this really thought-provoking question.

What if our modern Western worldview has actually blinded us to a reality that's been experienced and documented throughout history and across cultures? I love that question. It really makes you step back and re-examine your assumptions. It does.

And he brings in modern-day miracles, well-documented ones, especially from non-Western contexts, to challenge that ingrained skepticism. So he's saying, look, this isn't just ancient history. This is happening now.

Yeah. In our world. Exactly.

And he argues that these accounts force us to confront the possibility that we've prematurely dismissed an entire realm of experience. We've become too quick to dismiss the possibility of the miraculous. Maybe so.

And he emphasizes how important eyewitness accounts are in validating these experiences. He argues that if eyewitness testimony is considered valid evidence in other fields like history and law, then it should be given equal weight when we're considering miraculous events. It's a compelling argument.

He's building a bridge between these ancient narratives and contemporary experiences. He is. And it's important to note that Dr. Kiener doesn't claim that everyone who is prayed for is healed.

He's very upfront about that. He's not promoting a simplistic view of miracles. No, he acknowledges that there are complexities, mysteries, unanswered questions that come up when we explore this intersection of faith and lived experience.

It's not about easy answers. It's about being open to possibilities, exploring the edges of what we think we know. Exactly.

And with that, maybe we should dive into some of these compelling modern miracles that Dr. Kiener has uncovered in his research. I'm ready when you are. Let's hear about them.

Now, I know when we start talking about raising the dead, some people might be thinking, OK, that's where I draw the line. Yeah, that definitely pushes the boundaries of what most people consider possible. It seems like we're entering the realm of, like, the truly unbelievable, right? It does seem that way.

But Dr. Kiener dives right into that skepticism. He acknowledges that claims of raising the dead are often met with disbelief, and he's not surprised by that at all. Yeah, it's not every day you hear about someone coming back to life after being, you know, declared dead.

No, not at all. But here's something interesting. Before he even began researching miracles, he and his wife personally knew at least 10 people who had either witnessed or experienced a resuscitation.

Wow, 10 people. Yeah. And he points out how statistically improbable that is if these events are as rare as we tend to believe.

So it raises the question, are they really that rare? Or are we just not really attuned to them because, you know, they don't fit into our understanding of how the world works? I see what you mean. Do our preconceptions about death, that it's the absolute end, somehow prevent us from even seeing other possibilities? Maybe. And Dr. Kiener doesn't just rely on anecdotal evidence, either.

He brings in accounts from medical professionals. He talks about Dr. Chauncey Crandall, a cardiologist who was called in to certify the death of a patient. This man had been flatlined for 40 minutes.

No heartbeat. His fingers were already turning black from lack of oxygen. 40 minutes.

I mean, that seems way beyond the point of no return. You would think so, right? But Dr. Crandall felt this urge to pray for the man.

So he prayed, and then he asked his colleague to use the defibrillator one last time. And incredibly, the man's heart started beating again. He came back to life after 40 minutes.

Wow. Was there any lasting damage? No. Amazingly, he made a full recovery with no brain damage.

That's incredible. Which is really striking because medical science suggests that even six minutes without oxygen can cause irreversible brain damage. But this man was talking and interacting normally just a few days later.

It completely defies what we know about the human body. It does. Dr. Kiener presents another case with Dr. Sean George, an Australian doctor who actually died in the presence of his colleagues.

They tried to revive him for 55 minutes after a heart attack, but his organs were failing. No sign of life. They were about to take him off life support when his wife knelt down and started to pray.

And at that moment, his heart started beating again. 55 minutes. I mean, that's almost an hour.

That's just astounding. And he recovered. He did.

His colleagues were stunned, and they warned his wife that even if he did survive, he would likely be in a vegetative state because of the severe brain damage. But against all odds, he made a full recovery. That's incredible.

Yeah. Return to practicing medicine and lived for several more years. You know, it's these accounts from doctors who are trained to understand the body, you know, its limitations.

They're the ones encountering these things that just transcend their scientific understanding. It makes you wonder if there are forces at play here that we don't fully comprehend. Right.

And it's not just confined to the medical realm. Dr. Kiener shares a story from his colleague, Dr. Deborah Watson, a New Testament professor. When she was a child, her baby sister fell from a high bassinet and landed headfirst on a concrete floor.

Her father thought her skull was crushed. But when the doctor examined her, there wasn't a single injury. It's like some unseen force intervened, protected the baby from what should have been a fatal fall.

Yeah. It really challenges our understanding of cause and effect, the laws that we think govern the physical world. And Dr. Kiener is very careful to emphasize that these are real people, people that he knows personally.

These aren't just stories. Right. He wants us to understand that these are accounts grounded in real-life experience, and that personal connection, you know, makes it more real.

Does he broaden the scope beyond these personal accounts? He does. He weaves in stories from his own life and family, but he also expands to include accounts from around the world. I see.

So it's not just a Western phenomenon. No, not at all. For example, he shares this story from the Nishi tribal people in India where a government official's son was dying after they tried everything to save him.

Someone suggested praying to the Christian God while the son was raised from the dead. And it sparked this wave of conversions among the Nishi people. It shows the power of these miracles to impact not just individuals, but entire communities.

Like a ripple effect. Exactly. And he shares other accounts from different parts of the world, too.

He talks about a pastor in Mumbai who witnessed the revival of a young Hindu boy who had drowned. There is also the account from the Philippines where this woman was pronounced dead, sent to the morgue, and woke up an hour and 45 minutes later. An hour and 45 minutes in the morgue.

It sounds unbelievable. It does. But Dr. Keener presents it as fact.

He also shares a story from his own neighbor, a man from Indonesia. His friend had his neck slashed in an attack. Shouldn't have been fatal, you know.

Wow. He was being transported to the morgue when he suddenly came back to life, and he claimed to have seen heaven. It's a story that really stretches the boundaries.

But if his neighbor is a credible source, it's worth considering. Are there more accounts like this? There are. He talks about a story from Professor Ayodeji Adewuya from Nigeria.

His son was pronounced dead at birth. Oh, my goodness. After he and his wife prayed for like half an hour, the baby came back to life.

No way. No lasting complications. Just another example of a seemingly impossible event.

But it's attested to by a respected professional. It's hard to ignore all these stories, especially when they come from, you know, such diverse sources and cultural contexts. But I'm sure

some people might be wondering, well, if this is real, why don't we see it more often? Why isn't everyone who's prayed healed? That's a natural question.

And Dr. Keener doesn't shy away from it. He acknowledges that prayer doesn't always lead to the outcome we desire. He even talks about his own personal experiences, you know, with miscarriage and health issues and how even with fervent prayer, things don't always turn out the way we hope.

It's a humbling reminder that we don't have all the answers and that there are things at work here that we may never fully understand. Right. He's honest about the fact that there are limitations to our understanding.

He even tells the story about a friend of his in Nigeria who prayed for his best friend to be raised from the dead, and it didn't happen. Oh, wow. Yeah.

So it reminds us that we're dealing with something that goes beyond our ability to fully comprehend or control. It's about faith, but it's also about accepting the mysteries that are at the heart of our existence. You know, he's not presenting these accounts as proof of a particular theological viewpoint.

He's presenting them as a challenge to our assumptions. Like he's saying, don't just take my word for it. Listen to these stories, weigh the evidence, and decide for yourself.

Exactly. He's creating space for open-minded inquiry. He's not trying to convince anyone.

And I, for one, am certainly intrigued. But before we go any further, we have one more layer to this conversation. In part three, we'll delve into even more personal accounts.

Stories from Dr. Keener's own family that shed even further light on this fascinating phenomenon. You know, after those stories in part two, I have to admit my mind is still kind of reeling. The doctor came back to life after almost an hour.

The baby was unharmed after that fall. I'm still trying to process it all. It's a lot to absorb for sure.

But remember, we're not just talking about abstract concepts. These are real people whose lives were deeply affected by these events. Yeah, you're right.

It makes you think about the power of faith, the human spirit overcoming these insurmountable obstacles. It does. And Dr. Keener continues that exploration as he dives into some accounts from his own family.

It brings another level of closeness to the conversation. Yeah, this is where it gets even more personal. It does.

He starts by talking about his wife's aunt, a very devout Christian woman who was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Doctors only gave her a few months. I can't imagine getting a diagnosis like that.

Just devastating. Absolutely. But she had this really strong belief that God would heal her.

And as her condition got worse, she became bedridden, couldn't eat or drink. Her family all gathered around praying and singing hymns. That's such a powerful image, like a circle of love and support.

It is. And then this amazing thing happened. She sat up in bed, totally alert and free from pain, asked for a glass of water, and drank it all.

Like a second chance. What did the doctors say? The family believed she had been miraculously healed. The doctors, though, were pretty skeptical.

They insisted it was just a temporary remission, that the cancer would come back. But it didn't. Nope.

She lived another 15 years, cancer-free. And what's really interesting is that her personality changed. Oh, how so? Before the cancer, she was known as timid and reserved.

But after, she became really outgoing, fearless. She even started traveling to villages, sharing her faith, which is something she never would have considered before. Like her encounter with death and then her recovery unleashed this whole new side of her.

Yeah, it's pretty remarkable. And that theme of transformation continues in another story about his wife's uncle, a well-known preacher. He was preaching at this revival meeting when he collapsed on stage.

I'm not really familiar with, like, revival meetings. What are those exactly? Oh, they're common in some Christian traditions, particularly Pentecostal churches. It's like a series of, you know, religious services focused on spiritual renewal and often features things like, you know, passionate preaching, music, and prayer for healing.

Gotcha. So what happened after he collapsed? He was rushed to the hospital. Turns out he had a massive brain aneurysm.

That's extremely serious. Yeah, the doctors thought there was nothing they could do. They said he was basically brain dead.

His family must have been heartbroken. They were, but they gathered around him, praying, singing hymns, just like they had done for his wife years before. After hours of prayer, he regained consciousness.

Wow. Did he recover? He did. Made a full recovery, continued preaching, and lived for several more years.

And these stories, you know, coming from his own family, it just adds this extra layer of authenticity. It's almost like he's saying, this isn't just some theory I'm talking about. It's something that touched my life, my family, in this really personal way.

Right. And that personal touch makes it that much more powerful. It does.

It really makes you stop and think: if it can happen to people we know and trust, people close to us, then why not anyone? But it also raises questions, you know. Why do some people experience these miraculous healings while others don't? It's a question a lot of people grapple with. And Dr. Kiener doesn't pretend to have all the answers.

He recognizes that there's a mystery here and that there are limits to our understanding. It's a humbling reminder that there are things we may never fully understand, forces at work in the universe that are beyond our grasp. Right.

But despite that lack of understanding, his work encourages us to be open, to challenge our assumptions about what's real and what's possible. He doesn't want us to shy away from these questions. It's like an invitation to step outside of what we think we know and to consider that the world might be a lot more mysterious and wondrous than we've ever imagined.

Exactly. Well, we've covered a lot of ground in this deep dive, from ancient accounts to modern-day miracles, personal stories of healing and transformation. What are some key takeaways, things we can carry with us as we go forward? I think the biggest one is the importance of an open mind, being willing to consider different perspectives, even if they challenge us, and also to recognize that there are limits to our current scientific understanding and that there might be more to reality than we currently perceive.

And to embrace the mysteries, to recognize that maybe we don't have all the answers and that's okay. It's actually kind of exciting. I think so too.

Well, thank you for joining us on this deep dive into the world of miracles. If you're interested in learning more, I highly encourage you to check out Dr. Keener's work. He's written extensively on this topic.

And who knows, maybe this is just the beginning of a whole new way of seeing the world for you.