

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 5

Podcast Audio Overview

Miracles and Evangelism

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome back, everyone. We're diving into some fascinating stuff today. You sent over Dr. Craig Keener's lecture notes on miracles and evangelism.

Oh, yeah. This should be a good one. It looks like he focuses specifically on the book of Acts and pulls in some, well, pretty incredible modern-day accounts.

So today, let's try to uncover some of these compelling stories and try to see how miracles play a role in Christian evangelism and, I guess, explore if they still happen today. That's a question that makes you wonder what you think is possible. You know, it's funny.

One part of me wants to be skeptical, but then when you hear some of these stories, it's like, how can you just dismiss them? Like this one story about this six-year-old girl named Olive in Cameroon just totally grabbed my attention. She was actually pronounced dead at the hospital, but her parents, obviously desperate, took her to Pastor Andre Mamadze's church. Oh, wow.

Get this. Eight hours after she was declared dead, Olive walks into the prayer meeting alive. Oh, my.

Totally fine. That's incredible. I know.

And what makes it even more compelling is that the translator, who was working with Dr. Keener, had actually heard this story independently- Oh, really? Of the assistant pastor. Wow. So it's not just, you know, a one-off thing.

It wasn't just hearsay or a rumor. Exactly. It's corroborated.

Yeah. Then there's Milgrace. Okay.

A baby in Congo, Brazzaville, who was stillborn. Oh, God. The midwife, Jeanne Mabiala, along with a mother and another woman, prayed for her.

And then, when the father returned with a coffin that he had built, he found Milgrace alive. Oh, my goodness. They named her Thousand-Fold Grace.

Wow. That's fitting. Right.

What a name. That really reflects the belief in divine intervention- yes. That underpins so many of these stories.

And that same belief is evident in the story of Papa Albert Basuswe. Okay. He was a school inspector in Congo who encountered a crowd gathered around a young girl who had died.

Oh, yeah. I remember reading about this one. Yeah.

They had- they tried all sorts of traditional healing methods. Yeah. Nothing worked.

Right. So Papa Albert prayed for her, and she came back to life. Wow.

Later, another child died, and the villagers went to find Papa Albert. But he was out of town, so his wife, Julianne, ended up praying for the child, and the child was revived. Really? But what's remarkable is that neither Papa Albert nor Julianne ever prayed for anyone else to be raised from the dead.

Wow. It's as though they saw this as a specific act of God, not just something they could do at will. You know, if that happened to me- yeah.

I feel like I'd be going around praying for everyone. Oh, no. Right? It makes you think about the nature of these events, doesn't it? It does.

And speaking of personal connections, Dr. Keener actually shares a story about his own family. His mother-in-law. Antoinette Malomby had a two-year-old daughter, Therese, who stopped breathing after being bitten by a snake.

Oh, no. A family friend prayed for her, and Therese was revived. Oh, my goodness.

And she's an adult now. That's always amazing when we hear these stories from people we know. Yeah.

Or people close to the researcher themselves. Yeah. It's not just these big, dramatic stories of people coming back to life.

There's also Dr. Keener talks about some healings in Congo, a nature miracle in Papua New Guinea- what was that? ... where a well miraculously filled with water during this really bad drought. Oh, wow. And even some pretty wild stuff in China.

Oh, like what? This one story about a Christian who boldly declared that it would rain on this big pagan festival day, which for like 200 years there had been no rain on this day. Oh, wow. But it poured.

Really? Yeah. It washed away the priests and broke their deity statue. And a lot of people ended up converting to Christianity because of this.

Oh, my goodness. Talk about a sign from above. Right.

So we're seeing a pattern here, right? All these stories- right. ... across different cultures, continents, about events that just seem to defy our understanding of the natural world. Yeah.

So how do we even begin to make sense of these accounts? That's where things get really interesting. Okay. Dr. Keener brings up some of the philosophical arguments against the possibility of miracles.

One of the most influential figures in this whole debate is David Hume. Oh, yeah. He was a philosopher who really shaped how a lot of people, especially in the West, view miracles.

Didn't he basically say that miracles can't happen? Well, it's a little more nuanced than that, but essentially, yes. He argued that miracles violate the laws of nature, which are by definition inviolable. Therefore, miracles are impossible.

But how can you just assume that miracles are impossible? It's like saying, I've never seen a purple cow, so purple cows don't exist. You've hit on a key point. Okay.

Some critics argue that Hume's argument is circular. He begins by assuming that miracles are impossible and then uses that assumption to just dismiss any evidence that suggests otherwise. Dr. Keener even brings up the story of Pascal's niece.

She was miraculously healed from a running sore by a holy relic. And this healing was verified by the queen mother's physician. Wow.

But Hume just dismissed it at a hand because he didn't like the Jansenists. So he's letting his own biases kind of cloud his judgment? Right. That doesn't seem very scientific.

It doesn't, does it? But putting Hume aside for a second, do these stories, regardless of whether we call them miracles, actually tell us anything about the world? That is the million-dollar question. And to answer that, we have to, I think, look beyond the individual anecdotes and consider how prevalent these kinds of accounts are. So let's talk numbers again.

How common are these miracle claims? Are we talking a handful of stories or is this something much bigger? Well, a 2006 Pew Forum survey estimated there were 200 million Pentecostals and Charismatics in just 10 countries who claimed to have witnessed divine healing. Okay, but that's just, you know, those groups... Right. But here's the thing.

Why? 39% of other Christians in those same countries also reported witnessing divine healings. So we're talking potentially hundreds of millions of people. Potentially.

That's mind-blowing. And that's not even counting other parts of the world, right? Right. I remember reading that a pretty big percentage of Americans claim to have seen or experienced supernatural healing too.

That's right. 34% of Americans. Okay.

So that just like blows Hume's idea out of the water then? It does. That human experience is uniform and excludes the possibility of miracles. Exactly.

We're dealing with something much broader than a lot of people even acknowledge. For sure. Like we have this whole other world of experience and belief that we just ignore because it doesn't fit into our nice, neat scientific worldview.

It's easier to dismiss it than to try to understand it sometimes. It is. And it's not just in the West, right? One source estimated that something like half of new conversions in China from the 1980s and 1990s were attributed to faith healing.

Wow. And some people who work in rural house churches in China even say it's closer to 90%. 90%? That's remarkable.

That's huge. Miracles are playing a central role in the spread of Christianity, especially in places like China where there's just this huge spiritual seeking going on. Absolutely.

And it's not limited to China either. Where else? Well, there was this study in Chennai, India that found 10% of non-Christians reported being healed. Wow.

When someone prayed for them in Jesus' name. 10%. That's incredible.

I know. These are people who didn't even identify as Christian. Yeah.

It makes you think about the power of prayer, belief, even across different religious backgrounds. I know. Dr. Keener actually shares a story about one of his former students, Pastor Israel, whose Baptist church in India grew from a handful of people to 600.

Wow. Mostly Hindu converts through prayer for the sick. That's amazing.

It is, right? So it seems like these experiences aren't just confined to a particular culture or region, but they're happening all over the world. Yeah. So what does this mean? What does the fact that there are so many of these accounts tell us about the world, our place in it? I don't know if I have an answer to that.

That's a great question. It is a great question. And one I'm not sure I have an answer to.

It's making me really think about a lot of my own assumptions. Me too. About what's possible and what isn't.

Yeah. So where do we go from here? I don't know. We've talked about these amazing stories, the philosophical arguments, how common miracle claims are.

Right. How does this all connect back to the Book of Acts, which was a focus of Dr. Keener's lecture? Well, Acts provides a fascinating historical context, I think, for understanding the role of miracles in early Christian evangelism and church planting. That sounds like a great place to pick up next time.

Yeah, I think so. So the Book of Acts, it's just jam-packed with stories about how miracles were used to spread the gospel. Yeah.

And to plant those early churches. Right. Exactly.

It really is like reading a guidebook on early Christian evangelism. You see how these miracles, they weren't just random events, but they were often these signs that pointed people toward Jesus's message. Yeah.

Like they created openings for sharing the gospel. That might not have existed otherwise. Right.

One thing that I thought was really cool was how the Apostle Paul, he's such a key figure in Acts. Yeah. He really was like a master of tailoring his approach to his audience.

Oh, yeah. He was a pro at that. He'd adapt his approach depending on whether he was in a synagogue or if he was talking to farmers or engaging with philosophers in Athens.

He was great at contextualization. So he was meeting people where they were at, using language and examples that resonated with their worldview. Exactly.

That's pretty fascinating. And what's really remarkable is that while his methods changed depending on the context, his core message was always the same. It was consistent.

Yeah. That Jesus died and rose again. Heart of the gospel.

Yeah. You know, it makes you think about how we approach sharing our own beliefs today. For sure.

It's not about forcing this one-size-fits-all message on people, but finding ways to connect with them authentically and respectfully. Yeah. I agree with that.

The early Christians in Acts were incredibly adaptable and creative in how they shared their faith. For sure. I think there's a lot we can learn from them.

I think so too. It wasn't just about preaching, though, right? Right. Dr. Kiener talked about this too: the importance of discipleship and multiplication and the growth of the church.

That's a key point. It wasn't enough to just convert people to Christianity. The goal was to equip them to become disciples.

To share the gospel themselves. Right. And make more disciples.

It's that multiplication, not just conversion, that led to this kind of exponential growth of the early church. Yeah. It's like a ripple effect.

It really is. Right. Where one person's faith sparks another and another.

And it just keeps spreading. It's about sustainability, not just immediate impact. That makes a lot of sense.

It's interesting, right? How these stories of miracles, even if we look at them skeptically, challenge us to think about how we view the world. I know what you mean. It's easy to get caught up in a purely materialistic view where everything has to have this scientific explanation.

Right. Cause and effect. Right.

And anything outside of that, we're just like, nah, that's not possible. It's suspect. But then we hear these accounts of these crazy healings, these events that just seem to defy our understanding of natural laws.

And it forces us to ask, is there more to reality than what we can see and measure? Right. That's a really humbling thought. It is.

You know, that maybe we don't know as much as we think we do. Yeah. And maybe there are forces at work that we don't fully understand.

That's kind of where faith comes in, right? Yeah. That willingness to believe in something beyond what we can see or touch or fully explain. That's a good way to put it.

And I think these stories, you know, whether we take them literally or metaphorically, they invite us to at least consider that there might be more to life than what we can immediately see. So if we, if we entertain the possibility, even just for a second, that miracles are still happening today, what does that mean for how we should live our lives? That's a big question, isn't it? That's a huge question. And I don't, I don't know that there's one right answer, but I think maybe this deep dive has given us a framework for thinking about it.

A framework that embraces both the wonder of the unknown and the insights of human reason. I think you hit it on the head. It's not about, you know, throwing away our scientific understanding, blindly accepting everything we hear, but it's about cultivating that curiosity, that openness to the possibility that there might be more to reality than we currently perceive.

And maybe, just maybe, if we do that, we'll encounter something miraculous ourselves. Wow. This deep dive into miracles and evangelism has really taken us on a journey.

It has, hasn't it? We started with these like really personal stories of healing and these events that people see as divine intervention, then got into the philosophical arguments against miracles. Yeah. Hume and all that.

Exactly. Yeah. And we ended up recognizing just how common these kinds of claims are across different cultures and times.

You know, I think what really strikes me is that the human experience with, well, I guess what some would call the supernatural, is way more diverse and prevalent than we might assume if we just, you know, kind of stick to a purely scientific point of view. We've heard stories of, like, people coming back to life, babies being healed after, you know, getting bitten by snakes. Right.

Droughts ending with these like crazy downpours. And what I find really interesting is that these aren't just ancient stories, you know, they're not just like folklore. They're happening today all over the world.

And it's not even just, you know, devout Christians who are experiencing or reporting these things. Right. A lot of these accounts are from people who were initially skeptical or even like hostile towards Christianity.

It's almost like these experiences open up a different way of seeing the world. It's like they crack open the door a little bit to something beyond. Maybe there's more going on that we can even fully grasp, you know, with our limited human understanding.

That's right. It really forces us to consider whether, you know, our current worldview actually accounts for all of human experience. And the possibility that there's a reality beyond what we can see and touch.

It's a humbling thought. It is. It really is.

Maybe we don't have all the answers, and there are forces at work that we're just starting to kind of get a glimpse of. And within that vast and mysterious universe, maybe there's a force, a God, who loves us and wants to connect with us in ways that we just don't expect. So it brings us back to that big question.

If miracles are still happening, what does that mean for us right here, right now? Does it change how we understand the world? And how might it change how we actually live our lives? Those are really tough questions. They are. Ones that I think we all have to grapple with.

There's no one right answer, obviously. But I think hopefully this deep dive has given us a different way to think about these things. One that kind of holds on to the wonder of the unknown, but also uses human reason to try and understand it.

It's not about throwing away our scientific understanding or just blindly accepting every claim we hear. It's about being curious. Being open to the possibility that there might be more out there.

To more. Yeah, more than we can see or explain at this point. And who knows? Who knows? Maybe if we do that, if we stay open, we might just experience something miraculous ourselves.

Well, thanks for joining us for this deep dive into miracles and evangelism. It's been a pleasure. We hope it's given you some things to think about and maybe inspired you to explore these mysteries a little bit more.

The mysteries of the world and beyond.