Newman, Synoptics, Lecture 11
© 2013, Dr. Robert C. Newman

Survey of Gospel Miracles

We're continuing with our Synoptic Gospels course. We've looked at, so far, eight of our twelve units: the Historical Jesus, Jewish Background, Introduction to Exegesis and Narratives, Authorship and Date of the Synoptics, Exegeting Parables, Gospels as Literary Works, the Synoptic Problem, Geography of Palestine and Jerusalem. We have four more to go.

This morning we're going to be looking at miracle accounts, and exegeting miracle accounts. I want to say a word or two here about the genre. In the genre "miracle story," the definition of that kind of genre would be a narrative focusing on a miracle as its main feature. Usual features of this genre, besides those of narrative (obviously it is a type of narrative), are: that in order for the person to tell us [the event] 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. That might be healing or a deliverance, [and] there might be a response from the spectators, or there might be even 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: "Jesus 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 a lot of miracles in the Synoptic Gospels, probably roughly the same order of magnitude for numbers of miracles as there are for the number of parables in the Gospels.

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; a 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; 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 the demon in Matthew 17, Mark 9, and Luke 9; and then the two blind men narrated in Matthew 20, Mark 10, and Luke 18. That's all of them in Matthew that are healings.

Then there are 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; crippled woman, Luke 13; the man with dropsy in Luke 14; the ten lepers in Luke 17; the high priest’s servant who is healed, his ear healed, in Luke 22; and then put in the official's 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 5,000 in Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9; the walking on the water in Matthew 14 and Mark 6; feeding of the 4,000 in Matthew 15 and Mark 8; the coin in the fish's mouth in Matthew 17; the fig tree withered [in] Matthew 21 and Mark 11; and then, just in Luke, the catch of fish in Luke 5; and then 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 11:1-44.

**Miracle of the Demons and the Pigs: Mark 5**

For our sample of miracle we are to look at for exegesis here, we will look at the miracle of demons and pigs as found in Mark 5:1-20. This is my translation here: "And they (this would be Jesus and the disciples) went to the other side of the lake to the region of the Gerasenes." And 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 had gotten out of the boat, immediately there met him in 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 abjure 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 2,000 of them, and they drowned in the sea.

"And their herdsmen fled, 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 and sane, 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 (they 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, how much he had mercy on you.' And he went away, and began to proclaim in the 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 now.

Little bit about the geography: The location of this miracle is somewhat complicated by the variant readings for the region given in verse one. We get “Gerasenes” region, the “Gadarenes,” region and the “Gergesenes” and those are all terms referring to the inhabitants, and correspond to the town names of Gerasa, Gadara, and Gergesa. And those are all towns in that region. Two of them are the big Decapolis cities, Gadara and Gerasa, and the other appears to be the name of a village which still is known as Korsi, right in the kind of, well, the Sea of Galilee doesn't quite have corners, but it's in the northeast edge of the sea.

**Discussion of the Demons and the Pigs: Location**

If one looks at a historical map of the area, say the map in the front, the cover of the
UBS Greek New Testament, Gerasa 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 as I said a moment ago, we think where the village Korsi is today. Gerasa and Gadara as I said are large towns, two of the ten cities, 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, “The region of the Gerasenes, Gadarenes, Gergesenes,” in all three Gospels, rather than “region of Gerasa” 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. A few years ago the lake 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 down on the southeast end of the lake, which might have been the fishing territory for either Gerasa or Gadara. So either location is possible. You obviously need a fairly steep slope for the pigs to run down. So that’s a little bit about geography. There are 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 on their existence, though it says little about what they are. The standard idea is that they're fallen angels of some sort. But that is 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. We tend to lump as angels the seraphim and cherubim, and we don't really know for sure. So we'll probably leave it at that.

The Bible is quite clear then 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. Saul was harassed by an evil spirit in 1 Samuel 16. Ahab's prophets are misled by a deceiving spirit in 1 Kings 22, and 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 can't always tell who is acting. Is it the person who is demonized, 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 there is a great deal that we do not know about the unseen world.

Structure

Think a little about the features of this passage as a miracle account. The problem is narrated: the demoniac is introduced by, for a twenty verse passage, a fairly extensive description of his malady and the affects it has 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 towards Jesus is a result of his initiative rather than that of the demons. Imagine some kind of scenario that he can hear the demons talking in his head, and one of them says, "Look, there is Jesus," or something of that sort. The demoniac then 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 they come charging down there and don't realize until they get very close that one of them is Jesus. So we don't know whether we have a request for help here in our particular account.

Actions of the Miracle Worker: Jesus speaks with the demons and allows them to go into the pigs.

Result: the man is delivered and 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 to make sure the initial impression is that they are not responsible. The spectators, when they get there, are fearful, and they want Jesus to leave. Fear in the presence of the supernatural is, of course, a common phenomenon all throughout human history, and we see
that very much in the gospel accounts, and Bible accounts, as well as external materials. The former demoniac wants to come to Jesus. So those are some of the features of the passage as a miracle account.

**Miracle Story as Narrative**

But it's also a narrative, so we've got the standard features of a narrative: actors or characters, events and actions, scenes, plot, etc. The chief character is obviously Jesus, then the demoniac. We're not sure what his action is until he is healed in the sense of what is from his own initiative. The demons converse with Jesus and they act as a group. The pig herders don't speak—that is they are 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 there a few minutes later, and the villagers act as a group.

Then some actions: Jesus and his disciples arrive at the other side of the lake (the other side as compared with Capernaum, 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 narrative gives an aside to sketch his background situation. It is characteristic when introducing a character in an account to say a little bit about who he is, where he came from, or something like that. This one is rather long since this guy has a rather doleful history. Jesus commands the demons to come out, and some interesting phenomenon here: they resist and, rather ironically, they call on God to protect them. They adjure him by God not to throw them out (the Luke account has "throw them into the abyss.") They admit to being a legion.

A little background there: a legion was a standard army unit in the Roman army, and in full strength was about 6,000 men, so presumably the remark is to indicate that we're looking perhaps at 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.

The pig herders head for town and return with a crowd. The demoniac, by this time, is now dressed and sane. The crowd, when they realized what has happened, ask Jesus to leave. He does, but he instructs the former demoniac to tell others what God has done for him. Then we are told the demoniac tells the story throughout the Decapolis.

The scenes: there's just one. It all takes place at the lakeside, except for the closing
Plot: not real complicated. Jesus rescues a man from a mob of demons. And the incident provides some insight into human nature, demonic nature, and into Jesus' nature.

**Theological Reflections**

Well, my students and I thought about what was going on here, and we then tried to think about what kind of theological lessons we could get from this miracle. Since miracle accounts typically in the Gospels are intended to tell us about Jesus, the first thing to ask then is: What does this account tell us about Jesus?

The account says he is the Son of God, though the source for this particular information is not great. It’s the demons talking, and since they are liars, you don’t know if they are speaking the truth here and doubtlessly that is part of their purpose and why Jesus does not encourage the demons to speak. They are trying to say 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 is saying. But, in fact, he is the Son of God, and we know that from elsewhere; and, of course, typically, as we interpret passages in Scripture, we are seeking to interpret them in terms of our knowledge of the whole Scripture, which is, after all, why I suggested back earlier in our introduction to exegeting Jesus, that it is important to read the Bible over and over again until you have a good idea what is in it and know what is not in it. You can realize that when Jesus says, “You must be born again,” you can realize he is not talking about reincarnation as [reincarnation is denied] in the rest of the Bible. A Hindu or Buddhist might react to that way if that’s the only passage they had seen.

So 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 what you would say in an ultimate sense. He has compassion on those who are in bondage to Satan. We don’t know what this fellow’s responsibility was in winding up this way. It might have been substantial, but Jesus has compassion upon him.

We see something also important that we observe elsewhere in other passages. Jesus will allow people to go their own way. So here the people want him to leave, so he leaves. There are hints, particularly with this remark about Decapolis that, perhaps, explain some of the features
surrounding the feeding of the 4,000 later, which also appears to be over in this area. That is after he has given the former demoniac a few months to do his work there, are a lot of people are ready to listen to him when he comes back again. So those are some things I saw in the passage regarding Jesus.

Regarding demons: This passage is very clear that they exist and that they are dangerous. This is not just a primitive model for insanity. The question [that] has arisen to my mind is: 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 that 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 that we can’t see. They somehow know something about Jesus; 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 that they are able to control this fellow to a greater or lesser extent. They are able to control the animals as well. It's possible that they can only control one at a time, so that when these demons left the man there were enough of them to control the pigs which was said to be about two thousand or so. We don’t know.

However, demons are subject to God. We don’t live in a universe like the one the Zoroastrians saw, in which they had two gods of equal power who fight back and forth. 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 pick it up from the disciples as well in some incidents. I see three things here in that regard: first, people tend to put material things ahead of spiritual things, their own concerns ahead of others. So here's this great thing that has happened to this fellow: he's delivered, etc. There may well have been some people in the crowd who were real excited about that, although it doesn't appear that his own family is even in the neighborhood anymore. But the major concern of the crowds 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.

Second, people are in some cases subject to demons, and we don’t know much of the technology of that. You can find deliverance ministries who will give you lots of details. But how much of that is real and accurate information is very hard to tell.
Third, we also see that humans can also witness to God’s work in their lives without special theological training. Instead of keeping this former demoniac with him so that he can learn more about Jesus or something like that, it’s enough for a start that he go out and tell people what Jesus has done in his own life.

Well that raises the question then of how might—if we are preaching or teaching, or at a Bible study, Sunday school class, or something—how might we preach this particular passage? Well, I suggest a few things here. It would be rather valuable to help 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 of this generation. The principality and powers, or various political systems and institutions oppressing of the people, is one way Satan works. But that is not the only way he works. Satan is not reducible merely to institutional activities of that sort.

It would also 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. We are not strong enough. The “name it and claim it” sort of thing does not work in the sort of sense that we can do that on our own—if we just have faith enough or something. If we are really trusting who Jesus is, really trusting who God is, God can give us the power to do it. But it does not guarantee that he is going to do it. He doesn’t guarantee that we should try and get into situations where he must bail us out. That is kind of equivalent to 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 to be the kind of person he wants us to be; and if he brings us into circumstances where we face something like this, then depend upon him for whatever deliverance. We are someone who needs and trusts in him. In that case we do not need to fear satanic power.

We also find a lesson here, I think, that we see in the villagers. We should beware putting off God and preferring to go our own way instead. Rather than have this dangerous Jesus around, we just ask him to go away because God might just let us have our way, which might be a disaster. 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 connecting this involvement with the ability we have
in seeking to build those up as the Lord gives us opportunities. That’s my take on this particular miracle.

What we should do then is to take these miracle accounts as especially designed to show us who Jesus is and what he has come to do: to judge sin, to rescue people from Satan and from their own sinfulness, and to restore people to wholeness, as we see this person restored.

That’s our very quick discussion on exegeting miracle accounts.