

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 12

John – Part Two A Miracle Messiah

I. INTRODUCTION

Before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, John records seven of Jesus' miracles.¹ The number seven is significant in a number of respects. We should remember seven signified completion;² hence, the seven offered a "full picture" of Jesus' ministry.³ This lesson pulls out those seven miracles for examination.

II. THE MIRACLES

A. *MIRACLE ONE – Water to Wine*

John 2:1-11 sets out the first miracle recorded in John. Jesus and his disciples went to a wedding in Cana where apparently, Jesus' mother was helping in the wedding production. At the wedding, the wine ran out, and Jesus' mother sought help from Jesus. Jesus asks why his mother is getting him involved, but then instructs the servants to fill six stone jars with water. Having done so, the servants take the jars to the master of the banquet who, upon tasting the wine, wonders why the best wine was saved until last. As Jesus revealed his glory in this way, the disciples put their faith in him.

This miracle is significant in a number of ways. It is frequently used in weddings to show the compassion of Christ and interest God has in the affairs of man. That Jesus would chose to start his public ministry trying to alleviate the embarrassment of a family running short of wine at a wedding shows the care of our Savior and God

¹ There is an eighth miracle after the resurrection where Jesus sees that his apostles catch loads of fish. That miracle will be covered in a later lesson.

² For example, consider when Peter asked Jesus whether Peter should forgive seven times. Peter was not seeking an answer based on algebra. Peter was truly asking whether Peter was expected to forgive fully. Jesus' answer "70 times 7" was an admonition that even if you've feel you've forgiven fully, forgive more! See Matt 18:21ff.

³ Seven was the number of God's creation days and is seen by some as signifying the work of Jesus in starting anew the creating of God's kingdom.

over matters that some would consider “incidental.” This understanding of the miracle, however, misses part of the value of the miracle.

To first century Jews, weddings were very holy and important affairs. They saw marriage as an allegorical illustration of the relationship between God and his people. This perspective was not a first century novelty. The ceremony between God and the Jews at Mt. Sinai where Moses received the law was symbolic of a marriage ceremony. The covenant set up at Sinai followed the covenant of marriage in its form and procedure. In this light, the assistance of Christ at the marriage ceremony becomes something beyond a miracle of mere assistance. There is something very fitting about Jesus Messiah filling the needs at a marriage covenant ceremony through a miracle.

There is a final note that adds even further to the miracle Jesus performed here. The jars that were Jesus used to bring water from wine John noted to be “six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing...” (2:6). John does not accidentally inform us of the kind of jars used. Jesus took jars that were for cleansing under the law (jars that normally held water to make Jews ceremonially clean), and Jesus turned the cleansing agent of water into wine, which would become symbolic to all Christians throughout time as the blood of Christ. To a Christian looking back at this miracle (think John writing it as well as those of us reading it), we would be remiss if we failed to see the symbolism that the “best” wine, representing the best “blood,” comes from the cleansing jars at a ceremony that itself is seen as a reminder of God’s covenant with his people.

B. *MIRACLE TWO – Healing the Official’s Son*

John 4:43–54 sets out the second miracle recorded in John. Since the first miracle, Jesus had gone to Jerusalem and Samaria and then returned to Cana where the marriage was held. At Cana was a “royal official” whose son lay sick at Capernaum, a town on the Sea of Galilee some twenty miles away. The official heard that Jesus was in Galilee (Cana was part of the region of Galilee) and found Jesus to beg for Jesus to travel to Capernaum and heal his son, who was close to death. Jesus does not go with the man. Instead, Jesus tells the man to return home, that the man’s son is not going to die.

As the man returns home, servants meet him on the road and tell him that the son's fever broke at 1:00 in the afternoon the prior day and the boy was going to be okay. The official realized that this was the very time that Jesus had told the man to go because the boy would live. The man and his household were all moved to faith in Jesus through this event.

John specifies that this was Jesus' second sign performed having come from Judea into Galilee. This tells us that the official did not come to Jesus because of the reputation Jesus had established as a healer or physician. That the man begged Jesus to come and heal his son indicates that this was not a test by the official, but was a plea of the heart, reaching out in any direction the man thought might offer help.

Similarly, John adds a statement of Jesus that "unless you people see signs and wonders you will never believe" (4:48) which would seem to indicate the man did not come out of faith that Jesus was Messiah or a miracle worker. Although there is no doubt that the reputation of Jesus' abilities were spread by the servants and others who had observed the water into wine at the wedding earlier, such rumor held Jesus out as beyond ordinary. So, we are left with a picture of a man who is desperate for the life of his son seeking help from one rumored to be able to do the miraculous.

Jesus instructs the man to leave, that the boy will not die. The man leaves. The news the man gets is not merely that the boy has not died. The man gets news that the boy in fact is healed with his fever gone. The healing took place the moment Jesus spoke.

At this point in John, we see that Jesus' ministry is rooted not only in creating (water to wine) but also in restoring that which is broken or sick. While the first miracle harkens us back to Genesis one and God's miracle of creation, this second miracle reminds us of the sickness and disease which came into the world through the fall in Genesis three and Jesus' work on the effects of the curse that followed the fall.

C. *MIRACLE THREE – Healing at the Pool*

John 5:1-15 set out the third miracle John gives us. An indeterminate time after healing the official's son, Jesus went to Jerusalem for a feast. While there, Jesus went by a pool called Bethesda where blind, lame, and paralyzed people used to lie, perhaps in hope of a miracle.⁴ Jesus hears of the man's 38-year stint as an invalid and asks whether the man wants to be well. The man makes an excuse about his inability to get into the waters when "stirred" and Jesus stirs up something more real! Jesus declares the man is to "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (5:8). The man does so.

These events occur on the Sabbath, which made a two-fold problem to the critical religious crowd. First, Jesus should not be healing on the Sabbath; and second, the man should not be carrying his mat on the Sabbath. When certain Jews see this man "sinning" by carrying his mat, they instructed him not to carry the mat. The healed man answers that he was merely following the instructions of the one who healed him.

The Jews are not amazed at the healing. Instead, they are intent on identifying the healer who was prompting such lawless behavior! The man is not able to identify Jesus because he never really knew who Jesus was! It is not until later that Jesus finds the man again and instructs the man to do more than carry his mat and walk. Jesus tells the man to stop real sinning. This seems to convey that the man was caught in some sin that was responsible for the lameness. Jesus notes that something worse than lameness could proceed from the sinning.

John notes that this Sabbath healing intensified the Jewish persecution of Jesus. From it flows a discourse where Jesus explains that God is at work. This is not an issue of Sabbath violation. The very God who rested on the Sabbath and declared it holy is behind the works of Jesus, his son.

⁴ Some manuscripts that are not as reliable as others insert a verse that periodically God would send an angel to disturb the waters and the first one in after the stirring would get healed. The New International Version puts this insertion in a footnote because it is most likely a later addition by someone other than John who wanted to explain why so many infirmed and sick were stationed at the pool.

D. *MIRACLE FOUR – Feeding the 5,000*

John 6:1-15 records the fourth miracle John sets out in his gospel. Near Passover time, Jesus crossed over the Sea of Galilee and was followed by a lot of people. These folks were following because they had seen a number of Jesus' miracles. When Jesus saw the many people, he asked Philip where they should buy bread to feed the folks. Jesus knew he was going to miraculously feed the people, but he was asking Philip as a test. Philip replied that eight months pay wouldn't be enough to feed the people, at which point Andrew spoke of a boy with five small loaves and two small fish. Jesus tells his disciples to sit the people in the grass.

As the approximately 5,000 men sit, Jesus takes the boy's loaves and fish, gave thanks, and passed them out. After everyone ate their fill, the leftovers filled twelve baskets. At this point, the people perceived Jesus as their "this world" deliverer and sought to make him king by force. Jesus, knowing his true role in the world, withdrew to another mountain to be alone.

One thing that quickly stands out in this account is that this miracle is recorded in each of the synoptics as well. In fact, this is the only miracle that is recounted in all four gospels. This raises a question: If we are correct that John was writing after the publication and distribution of the other gospels, then why repeat this story? One reason seems to be a constant running parallel that John seems to be making between the life of Jesus and the five books of Moses. In addition, John is constantly comparing Jesus to Moses himself in ways that show Jesus' superiority to Moses.⁵

In that vein, Jesus is elevated above Moses in this story. For Moses had called down God's manna from heaven to feed the Jewish masses in the wilderness. Jesus, on the other hand, gives thanks and himself produces bread and fish to feed the people.

⁵ For example, in John 1:17, it reads that "the law was given through Moses; grace AND truth came through Jesus Christ." Similarly, in John 7:16ff Jesus says if it was right for Moses to allow circumcision on the Sabbath, then the leaders should not be upset with Jesus for healing on the Sabbath.

It is no wonder that the people sought to make Jesus king. Here was one who had already exhibited healing power. He was now taking things a step farther and showing a miraculous ability to feed people when there is no apparent quantity of sufficient food. What a king to have! He can heal the sick that no one else can heal. He can offer free food at the expense of no one, and in the whole process show himself greater than Moses, the foundation of religious practice.

What the people offered was really no different than Satan's temptation recorded in Matthew to make Jesus king in return for subservience to Satan. Jesus again rejects the temptation, choosing instead the road God set before him with the Kingship God had for him.

John also includes the story to underscore some teaching Jesus had for his disciples the following day. John 6:25-71 records dialogue between Jesus and many of the followers relevant to the miracle. Jesus urges his followers not to seek food for the day from Jesus, but nourishment for eternal life. Jesus then offers the Mosaic comparison noting that while manna might have fed the people with Moses, God has given true bread from heaven that should not be confused with manna. This bread is Jesus. Jesus calls this the "bread of life" that comes into the world to bring life.

Some of the followers grumble over Jesus' claim to be bread from heaven. They saw him as "Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know" (6:42). In spite of the grumbling, Jesus reiterates that he is the bread of life that, unlike manna which people ate and then died, would give eternal life. Jesus was clear that he was from heaven and would give his flesh up for the life of the world. Those who would partake in the body and blood of Christ would live forever with the father.

The contrast between day one and the feeding of the masses with day two and the explanation of the bread of life is stark. While on day one the people wished to make Jesus king, on day two many desert Jesus because of his hard teaching that his flesh and blood were to be consumed by his followers who would live forever. No longer looking to make him king by force, many of the followers left Jesus at this time. Jesus' kingship would still be established. It would be a kingdom of life. But, those who wanted a king on their own terms would have nothing to do with it.

E. MIRACLE FIVE – Walking on Water

In between the feeding of the five thousand and the teachings on the bread of life occurs something – night! During the night, the disciples took a boat from the northeast shores of the Sea of Galilee to the northwest where Capernaum was located. Jesus was not in the boat. During the night, a strong wind blew on the lake making the rowing difficult.

While the disciples are hard at the oars, they saw in the night Jesus walking on the water. Thinking they were seeing a ghost (that detail was provided by Mark's gospel, John merely notes the disciples were "terrified"), they were no doubt relieved to hear Jesus say "It is I; don't be afraid." Jesus climbed into the boat and immediately the boat was on the other side of the lake at the end of its journey. The people were on the lookout for Jesus and were amazed to find him getting out of the boat with his disciples when they were aware Jesus had not gotten into the boat at the start.

This miracle is set between the feeding with the loaves and the teaching that Jesus was the ultimate bread for feeding, far surpassing the manna bread of the forefathers. No doubt John saw in the miracle walking on the water, the many layers of symbolism. First and foremost, while Moses would split the waters for the people to pass, Jesus could walk right across. Additionally, Jews saw water as chaos and danger. They were not a sea going people. A Jesus who tames the sea is one who rules over chaos and despair.

F. MIRACLE SIX – Healing a Blind Man

John 9 recounts a sixth miracle of Jesus healing a blind man. There was a man born blind who supported himself by begging. Jesus and his disciples saw the man and the disciples asked Jesus who sinned, the man or his parents causing the blindness in the man. Many Jews at the time believed that sin was the only cause of suffering. In fact, they believed that people with deformity could have resulted from either the baby sinning in utero or the parents sinning in the birth of the child. Those who held such beliefs should have attended our Biblical Literacy class on the results of the fall covered in early Genesis!

Jesus explained to his disciples that the blindness was not the result of sin from either the man or his parents. This sin would show the work of God in the man's life. Jesus then spit in the mud, formed a mud cake, placed it on the man's eyes and sent the man to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man went, washed, and received his sight.

Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath. While there might have been some dispute over the mere healing on a Sabbath, there was no question that the process of spitting in the dirt and making a mud cake was "work" in violation of Jewish Sabbath law.

When the Pharisees discovered that Jesus had done this miracle on the Sabbath, they were divided in their opinions. Some thought Jesus could never be from God because of such blatant sin. Others did not understand how a sinner could perform such great feats. The Pharisees asked the healed man his thoughts, and the man proclaimed Jesus as a prophet.

Disbelieving that the man was actually born blind, the Pharisees brought the man's parents in for questioning. The parents confirmed that he man was their son and that he had indeed been born blind. But, they would not comment on how the man was healed out of fear that acknowledging Jesus as Messiah was basis for expulsion from the synagogue.

The Pharisees again asked the man about his perception of Jesus and the man was a bit flippant. The man asked why the Pharisees wanted to hear the story again. Did they also want to be disciples of Jesus? The man confounds the Pharisees with a bit of logic (not necessarily great theology)⁶ good enough to frustrate the Pharisees who kick the man out of the synagogue.

Jesus heard that the man had been thrown out of the synagogue and went to find the man. The man did not recognize Jesus for he had never seen Jesus before. As their conversation unfolded, the man worshipped Jesus in belief. To the Pharisees, Jesus makes the point that even though they could see, they were blind to Jesus' identity. In that, the Pharisees had no excuse.

⁶ The man says, "we know that God does not listen to sinners" (9:31). This is sometime quoted as gospel truth in sermons and lessons. Unfortunately, the gospel truth is that the man SAID those words. That does not mean that those words are true. In fact, we know that God DOES listen to sinners. The only non-sinner to pray to God has been Jesus himself!

G. *MIRACLE SEVEN – The Resurrection of Lazarus*

In John 11, we read the seventh and final miracle John provides before the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the death and resurrection of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. These siblings were from Bethany and were very close to Jesus. When Lazarus was very ill, the sisters sent for Jesus to come and heal him. Upon hearing of Lazarus's sickness, Jesus declared that death would not be the end of the story on his illness.

Jesus did not leave immediately to heal Lazarus, but Jesus waited two more days. Jesus explained to the disciples that Lazarus had "fallen asleep" and Jesus was going to "wake him up" (11:11). The disciples misunderstood Jesus and actually thought Lazarus would be getting better on his own since he was sleeping. Jesus was then more blunt with the disciples and explained that Lazarus was dead.

By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Martha met Jesus on the road and told him so. Martha noted that had Jesus been there earlier, Lazarus would not have died. Even still, Martha knew Jesus could do anything he wished with Lazarus. Jesus told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Jesus then asked whether Martha believed this. Martha responded unequivocally "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world." (11:25-27).

Mary hears that Jesus is near and goes out to meet him. A number of those there to comfort and grieve with the family follow Mary and witness her encounter with Jesus. When Mary arrives, she is weeping. Upon realizing her pain, Jesus weeps as well.⁷ While the Jews had varying reactions to Jesus, Jesus himself sought out the cave where Lazarus was laid. The tomb had a stone rolled across the face which Jesus ordered moved. Jesus had this done in spite of Mary's concerns the odor would be great from four days of decay.

Jesus stood before the cave and called loudly, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus then came forth, still wrapped in his burial clothes. Jesus ordered the burial clothes removed.

⁷ This is the shortest verse in the Bible, 11:35 "Jesus wept."

This death and resurrection account closely relates the ministry of Jesus to all of us. He finds us dead in our trespasses and calls us forth to a new creation – a new life. Of course, many of us never heed the follow-up command to the resurrection story where Jesus orders the removal of the grave clothes. Many of us chose to walk around post-salvation still wearing the clothes of sinful people steeped in the death that was once ours. Much the pity!

John notes that after the events of Lazarus, the Jewish leaders were in a real dilemma on what to do with Jesus. They were worried that the commoners would proclaim Jesus king and cause the Romans to come destroy Jerusalem and the Jewish nation as traitors. This precipitated Caiaphas, the High Priest, to unknowingly prophesying the death of Jesus that year. Caiaphas believed he was making a good suggestion that enough was enough and they just needed to put Jesus to death. With that in mind, Caiaphas said, “It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” (11:50). John let’s us know that the prophecy was real. Jesus did in fact die so that many would live.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Jesus is Messiah Savior.
2. Jesus cares for us.
3. Jesus weeps with us.
4. Jesus dies for us.