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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Various

“The Messiah’s Year of Public Favor, Part II”

TRANSCRIPT

Our general theme at the present time is the New Testament Revelation of the Messiah and we are particularly concerned with the public ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ after his birth and baptism and temptation. And we are looking particularly at the Messiah’s Year of Public Favor, the second year of his public ministry.

Our Lord’s ministry was divided into three periods and they have been called the Year of Obscurity, the Year of Public Favor, and the Year of Opposition. We are looking at the Year of Public Favor and this is the second study on that topic. The second year of our Lord’s ministry was largely confined to Galilee, the most northerly of the four provinces of the land of Palestine. Located there were such places as Nazareth, Nain, Capernaum, Bethsaida, and other places familiar to all readers of the New Testament. There too was the beautiful Sea of Galilee, that sapphire stone set in gold, as it has been called.

The rabbis thought of the sea as God’s chosen sea. Many of the scenes pictured in the New Testament gospels were set there. The second year of our Lord’s ministry was spent in teaching, the performing of signs or miracles, and the gathering and training of his apostles. In our last study we looked at his teaching, its characteristics, its content, and its purpose. And in this study we are going to look at his miracles, or his signs.

But what is a miracle? C. S. Lewis in his book on the subject said, “I use the word miracle to mean an interference with nature by supernatural power.” Perhaps it would be wise to add that by nature is meant nature as we know it, as Augustine pointed out. Miracles cannot be contrary to nature since they happen by the will of God, and every created thing is by nature, subject to God’s will. Miracles are simply events in the external world, wrought by the immediate power of God as a sign or attestation of truth. Many modern theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann deny that miracles can occur. Such men affirm that we live in a closed continuum, regulated by natural law. David Hume, the famous Scott, affirmed that miracles were violations of natural law, and thus never happened in the common course of nature.

We can say this, however, the New Testament records many miracles. The greatest, of course, being the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One author has stated that of the six hundred and sixty-one verses in the Gospel of Mark, two hundred and nine are over thirty-one percent deal directly or indirectly with miracles. That has lead some to contend that the Bible abounds with miracles, the impression being given that one can find one on almost any of its pages. That’s very misleading since it suggests to some minds that we should have miracles happening all the time. In fact, modern churches use this idea to lead the unwary to think that unless claims of continuing miracles are being made, the churches are probably falling short of God’s best.

A simple study of the Bible indicates that miracles have occurred in periods. Major ones being the periods of the Exodus, the age of Elijah and Elisha, the time of Daniel, and the days of our Lord and his apostles. Our day, the day of the silence of God in this respect is not unusual and we should not be troubled over this. There have been many other times when this was true. It should also be noted that our Lord’s miracles were gratuitous. That is, no fee of any kind was levied. The same was true of the apostles. They made no claims on the saints such as that if the saints did not come forward with money they apostles would die or their buildings would not be built.

We turn now to a consideration of this aspect of the Messiah’s ministry, and so we look at the miracles and the Messiah’s ministry and first a word about the message. In Matthew’s account of the beginning of the Galilean ministry, there is specific reference both to the message of our Lord and the miracles he performed. Listen to Matthew chapter 4, verse 23 through verse 25, as Matthew describes the beginning of the ministry in Galilee,

“And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatic, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them. And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judea, and from beyond Jordan.”

What was his message? Matthew calls it the gospel of the kingdom, words that are defined in verse 17 as, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In other words, the nearness of the coming kingdom is the good news. Essentially what does this mean? To deal with this fully would take us far a field but it’s possible to accurately summarize the sense if we bear a few things in mind. First, the term “kingdom” is not redefined by our Lord and is, therefore, to be understood as it is in the Old Testament. There it is the messianic earthly kingdom that ethnic Israel expected from the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants. So our Lord did not have to preface his teaching with a description of the kingdom about which he was talking. They knew what he was talking about.

And second, the term “is at hand” literally has drawn near. In the person of the incarnate Messiah, the kingdom of God is now breaking into time. The eschatology of the Kingdom of God is being inaugurated. It is not yet wholly realized that that awaits

the future. Now as our Lord says later, “But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come unto you,” chapter 12, verse 28. And one might compare Luke 17:21.

And third in the light of later statements of our Lord which make it plain that the Kingdom of God is still future, although he is on the earth. It’s clear that Jesus looked for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God on the earth in the future. That’s why he instructed the disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come,” Matthew 6:10, and to, “Look for the kingdom in the future,” Luke 22:18. To sum up, the Kingdom of God has both come and is still to come simply because Jesus has both come and is to come again. The message of our Lord then has to do with the nearness of his kingdom in his first coming and incarnation. Now we turn to the miracles themselves.

These miracles accompanied the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom. Matthew makes it plain that teaching, preaching, and healing characterized his ministry. Healing miracles, then, were an integral part of the Messiah’s ministry. The impression is given of a traveling, triumphal march of a newly crowned monarch. He swept through the villages of the north amidst the popular enthusiasm of a vast number of people. But as McLaren says, “The King welcomed at first, is crucified at last. It was roses, roses, all the way in those early days, but they withered soon. He came into the realm of darkness and the region of death where sight and divine revelation was needed. And there he spoke with the voice of authority and certainty of God’s royal deliverer.” As someone has said of a great preacher, “He did not cloudily guess, he knew.” So our Lord did not spray doubts about the divine assurances. And he accompanied his explanations and proclamations of truth with visible evidence of his authentic power in his miracles.

That raises the question of their credibility. So we turn for a few moments to look at the miracles and their credibility. And first we look at historical evidence. Can a modern believer trained in philosophy and science accept the miracles? From Hume to Bultmann to whom we’ve referred, it is said that they cannot. Often, however, the

disbelievers forget their own scientific principles in their rejection of miracles. Is it not really a simple matter of historical evidence? We grant that a miracle requires good evidence. To modify an old illustration, we would need only slight evidence if someone told us that he had seen President Reagan walking on the White House lawn. But we would need rather strong evidence to believe the man who told us that he had seen Reagan talking to John the Baptist and with his head still on a platter. We would also need early evidence and by this criterion the evidence for miracles in the New Testament is strong.

But what about the question of secondary causes? It’s occasionally said that the miracles belonged to an age which had no understanding of secondary causes. That is, of ordinary means for doing of extraordinary things. We now know, for example, that a lot of things that were attributed to God are understandable by natural law that men did not understand at that time.

For example, in our Lord’s time it’s said that everything which could not be understood was traceable to God. Take the case of Jairus’s daughter. Jesus said of her, “The child is not dead but sleepeth.” And some explain the supposed miracle of restoration to life as simply a case of resuscitation from a coma; she was not dead at all it is claimed.

In the story of the Gerasene maniac it is said that we may question the statement that Jesus transferred the evil spirits to the swine, although we may still believe that he cured the maniac. The headlong panic of the swine into the sea would have been caused by the wild carryings on of the maniac. We hear a lot today about psychosomatic ills and the potent part played by the mind in healing. Of course, one might also say that if men can, by modern psychotherapy, bring to pass healing is it beyond the reach of sanity to believe that our sovereign Lord had the power to heal? That his mind and will had the power to influence physical nature? And contrary to modern psychotherapies claims, Jesus healed speedily and at a distance.

Granting all of this, it’s when we come to the nature miracles that all humanistic explanations of the Messiah’s miracles collapse. Can men, by psychotherapy, still the storms on the Sea of Galilee? And for a second miracle within the first bring an immediate calm on the sea? Can psychotherapy raise Lazarus from the dead? Can psychotherapy restore the year of Malcus, the high priest servant? Can psychotherapy multiple the loaves and fishes for the five thousand and walk on the sea? Enough of that.

We come to the estimate of our Lord. The rationalizations of psychotherapy cannot account for our Lord’s miracles. The storm that Jesus stilled was a storm of such tremendous gale force that it terrified seasoned fishermen who had spent their lives on the sea. It was not the storm of fear in their hearts for which the context lends no support whatsoever. Professor Hunter is right; rationalizations of this kind always leave us with the feeling that if this was all that happened, the story would never have been told.

When it comes right down to it, our view of miracles will usually depend upon two things. First, the truly scientific position that reality is by no means identical with reality as we perceive it. Honest scientists now admit that there are more things in the heavens and in the earth than pervious scientists have dreamed. And to be truly scientific and inductive, it’s illogical to deny the possibility of our Lord’s miracles. And second, the basic ground for belief in miracles is our estimate of Jesus himself.

What do we think of him? If he was only a human prophet performing miracles in his own name, then we shall probably and wisely reject the nature miracles. But if he is what Christians believe him to be, the second person of the holy trinity, the Son of God in a unique and lonely sense, and if he and the Father we absolutely at one in will and purpose, didn’t he say, “I and the Father are one.” Then is it absurd to think that he has control over nature itself. Let Professor Hunter conclude this part of the discussion; in other words, he says, “Grant the grand miracle of the incarnation and the main objection to the other miracles falls to the ground.” The issue has been memorably put by a recent

writer with whose words we may close this discussion. “If the universe is dominated by spirit, miracles are possible. If by spirit that is love, probably. And if that spirit has become incarnate, this miracle would make further ones very probably indeed.” Those are the words of Professor A. M. Hunter.

We find even more fundamental and basic confirmation. They are found in the word of God. Now one might ask at this point, “What is the purpose of the miracles?” And I suggest three reasons. First of all, they were the stamp of his character. Jesus was no ancient wonderworker like Simon Magus who sought to buy the power of Simon Peter. He didn’t, incidentally, travel around in the country with tents and calling people to a healing meeting and begging people to come. He took up no collections for his healing miracles. He refused to work propaganda spreading, prodigies of power to gratify the people of the times.

The Apostle John says that he was endowed by God with the Holy Spirit, and unmeasured power. He was God manifest in the flesh and as mediator, possessed of the divine Spirit. He himself was the great interruption of the order of nature; in fact, a new order now dwelling with it to enrich and ennoble it. His miracles were the natural outflow of his person. And God gave him and them to repair the disorder of a world now under the curse of sin.

They were symbols, secondly, of his saving work. The whole world of which we are all apart, as Paul puts it, “Groans, and travails, and pain together until now,” Romans 8:22. That is the result of sin and the fall and these consequences are distributed in all the details of human life over the globe. The whole creation from kings and presidents, to peasants and laborers, struggles hopelessly in the constricting coils of depravity and sin. Jesus’ miracles were symbols of the delivering power he offers. When he healed the body, he was illustrating his power over the inner man through his saving cross and redemption. When he healed the leper he spoke in dramatic form of his power to heal the leprosy of sin. When he stilled the storm he spoke of his power to calm the spirits of

troubled men. And when he walked on the water he published the fact that he was always available in times of trial.

And finally, they accredited his Messianic claims. The Scriptures had taught that the Messiah would perform signs when he came. Isaiah had said, “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness. The meek also shall increase their joy in the Lord and the poor among them shall rejoice in the holy one of Israel,” Isaiah 29, verse 18 and verse 19. “And also, then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart and the tongue of the dumb sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out and streams in the desert,” Isaiah 35, verse 5 and verse 6. That the signs were expected is confirmed by John 7:31 where we read, “And many of the people believed on him and said, When Christ cometh will he do more miracles than these which this man has done?” In other words, it’s evident they thought he had done the messianic miracles and in sufficient number.

In the foul atmosphere of his dank dungeon, John the Baptist’s faith we read began to flag and waiver a bit. Jesus’ ministry did not seem to be progressing as he had thought it would. That is, with the spectacular assumption of his role as king, the subduing of the nations and the ascension to the throne of eternal dominion. So John was perplexed and he sent and asked our Lord, “Art Thou he that should come or do we look for another?” Matthew 11:3. Jesus’ reply was essentially this, “My works proved my messiahship.” Encouraging John he said to him through the messengers, “Go and show John again those things which ye do see and hear; the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me.” And that is found in Matthew 11, verse 4 through verse 6.

It’s plain that he regarded the mighty miracles and signs as evidence that he was the one who was to come, the Messiah. The cleansing of the leper with which Matthew

begins the story of his ministry of miracles was a messianic miracle. The leper, a man who dies by inches, vividly pictures human sin and its affects. And Jesus’ work releases a song in the believer’s heart, “He saw me ruined in the fall, yet loved me not withstanding all.”

Other signs contributed to the total message also. He fed the five thousand and men wanted to make him a king before his time. He refused but it’s clear that something of his royal messianic authority and dignity had been sensed by those who saw the miracle, John 6, verse 14 and verse 15. The walking on the water that followed marked him out as the Yahweh or Jehovah of the Old Testament. When he spoke to the terrified sailors who thought he was a ghost, “Be of good cheer, it is I; be not afraid.” He was confessing his messiahship. Those words, “It is I,” are equivalent to the Old Testament affirmation by which Jehovah encouraged Israel in our deepest moments of need. They are the equivalent of the well-known expression, “I am he,” Isaiah 43:2.

This great formula was used at important feasts of the Lord such as the Passover. This event occurred at the Passover time; that is, the feeding of the five thousand occurred then. And the Passover liturgy glorified God as the God who rules the waters. It’s as if his coming on the water is the declaration that he is the Old Testament covenant-keeping sovereign who makes good all his word to his own. It said, in effect, “Where I am, God is; there God is, there God speaks, there God calls, there God acts, there God loves, there God forgives, and there God helps.” Nothing bolder or more significant can be said than, “It is I. I am he, the Messiah; sovereign Lord of all.” Such is our Lord’s messianic claim.

Grentman’s comment is correct; “The miracles of Jesus are part of the invading dominion of God which Jesus brings with his own person in proclamation and act. They are the dominion of God overcoming and expelling the sway of demons and Satan. They are the dawn of the final work of the God of revelation and salvation in calling Israel to repentance. The miracles then were evidences of the power of God working through the Messianic King. They were the evidences of immeasurable power and energy, seeking

those with measurable need. They were then not mere addenda to Jesus’ message; they were an integral part of it, being tokens of the reign to come. The Kingdom of God in anticipatory action, they manifested sovereign grace and forgiveness as operative in the Lord Jesus Christ. “If I,” Jesus said, “with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the Kingdom of God is come upon you.” The miracles are the finger of God.

They are, therefore, important; important in understanding the ministry of the Lord Jesus as the Messiah. He came with the promises of the word of God and he came with the signs that confirmed his identity. The signs did not produce faith, God produces faith. The signs identified him as the one in whom men should trust.

May I close with just a word of conclusion? It’s only a brief word but a brief word of application. The miracles of Jesus also bound men and women to him. Those cured by him became his men and his women, linked by the unbreakable bond of divinely produced gratitude for deliverance. Those who were healed generally advanced from faith in him as a worker of signs to a higher faith in him as the Messiah of the Son of God. In fact, John wrote his gospel in order to bring men through the presentation of the signs to believe in him as the Son of God and in believing in him to have life through his name. It was thus in the case of blind Bartimaeus, it was the case with the Centurion, it was true of the Gerasene maniac, it was true of Mary Magdalene out of whom went seven demons, and countless others. And it’s my hope and prayer that it may be so with you to.

Let me close with just a reminder of the fact that the Lord Jesus came as the divine, human Son of God. Human nature, that he might be our substitute. Divine nature, that his sacrifice may have infinite value with God. He offered himself upon a cross as the atoning sacrifice by which we may have eternal life. He paid the penalty for the sins of sinners and offers through his atoning work, eternal life to those who come to him, confess their sin outside of him, thank him for what he has done, and lean upon him for time and for eternity. May God in his marvelous grace touch your heart to see your condition as it truly is and may you come to Christ. Come to him now, believe in him.

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Next week we will look, the Lord willing, at the third of the years of our Lord’s
public...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]