



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Amazed, But Uncomprehending

Mark 6.30-56

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Have We Missed Something?

Has the challenge regarding miracles we have faced in our culture since the 1700s led us to miss the main point that the supernatural works of Jesus are supposed to show us?

To see why I ask that, you need a basic awareness of the Enlightenment view of miracles. In the West, the prevailing viewpoint has been that Reason is supreme and we now understand the world well enough to explain things without needing to resort to miraculous explanations.

While some expressed this naturalistic understanding of the world atheistically, others continued to express belief in a Divine being, but did not think he intervenes in the world. What, then, did they think about Jesus? His exemplary life and moral teaching were worthy of consideration, and even emulation, but the miracle stories were discounted as legendary accounts necessary in a time when people did not understand the workings of the world as we do.¹ Thomas Jefferson, for example, an unabashed Enlightenment thinker, published an edition of the gospels that reflected his views, removing all references to supernatural intervention.²

There is much we can say in response to this stance. We can challenge the method which presumes to deny the possibility of miracles before examining the individual miracle claims. We can also point out how much of Jesus' story makes no sense without the miraculous. For example, the intense opposition from Jewish leaders in John 9.13-34 and 11.45-57 is inexplicable if he had not given sight to the blind man and raised Lazarus from the dead.³

It is important to present such a defense, and many capable people have done so. But has the hard work necessary to defend the possibility of supernatural works caused us to miss their *point*? One thing that suggests it has is the assumption many make that only an agent of God was capable of supernatural works. Another is the way some emphasize what I'll call the "wow-factor" of the works without reference to any deeper point. In fact, both testaments contain references to the possibility of works by agents of evil (e.g., Deut 13.1-5; Mark 3.22). Furthermore, the word "wonder" is used only nine times in the New Testament and just three times in the gospels (Matt 24.24 = Mark 13.22; John 4.48). Every time, it is used with one or more of the other key terms for supernatural works (mighty works and, most often, signs).⁴

In our text, we read two amazing stories we generally know and a summary of Jesus' ministry. We marvel at how he can feed upwards of 5,000 people—a meal the disciples said would cost

“two hundred denarii” (v. 37)⁵—with just five loaves and two fish (6.30-44). We are perhaps even more amazed that he walked on water and again calmed one of Galilee’s fierce storms (6.45-52). Apparently, his contemporaries were also amazed, for people from all over brought their sick to him, hoping they could just touch the hem of his garment (6.53-56). But is there more to see here? Mark gives us reasons to conclude that there is.

To See Something More

1. Mark intended these stories to be considered together. At the end of his walking-on-the-water account, he said the disciples had hard hearts because “they did not understand about the loaves” (v. 52). This cannot mean that they did not understand that Jesus had fed so many with so little. So, what deeper truth had they missed?
2. Three times, Mark said that the feeding miracle took place in “a deserted place” (ἐρημος, *erēmos*, vv. 31, 32, 35, NRSV; see 1.1-3, 12-13). In light of other echoes from the Old Testament we will notice, it is not out of the question that Mark intended these references to remind his readers of how God had fed his people manna in the wilderness (Exod 16). John’s account makes this connection explicit (John 6.31, 49). This fits with the rest of the passage’s focus on these works as being designed to reveal Jesus’ true identity.
3. Verse 34 echoes Ezekiel 34.1-31 where God promised to feed his sheep by sending a king like David to be their shepherd (34.23), thus correcting the problems caused for his people by shepherds who had “been feeding themselves” instead of the sheep (34.2). Verses 5, 11-12, 15-16, 25, and 30 accentuate the Lord’s personal role as the shepherd.⁶
4. As Jesus neared the boat during the storm, he told the disciples, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid” (v. 50). “It is I” (ἐγώ εἰμι, *egō eimi*) is emphatic in the Greek and serves to reassure them they were not seeing a ghost (v. 49). It also echoes Old Testament language that traces back through key passages in Isaiah (43.25; 48.12; 51.12) to Exodus 3.14 where God revealed his name to Moses (cf. Mark 14.62). That in itself suggests a deeper point (see the multiple uses of ἐγώ εἰμι in John, including 6.20, 35, 41, 48, 51). If, as some think, the construction of the phrase “he meant to pass by them” (Mk. 6:48) is intended to suggest that Jesus intended to let the disciples see him to show he was God,⁷ the point is stronger still. It certainly makes sense of the expectation Jesus declared in v. 52.
5. The word “ghost” (φάντασμα, *phantasma*) can refer to “any kind of scary apparition, and since ancients often regarded the unruly sea as inhabited by sea demons, this is probably what is intended here” (Hurtado, 106).

What Should They Have Understood?

When we consider the three episodes together, in light of Mark’s emphasis throughout his writing, we begin to see that what they should have seen was God among them. That is the beginning of any practical application to be made of this text. Jesus was not just a good example. He was not just the master teacher. He certainly was not just a superior miracle worker. He was God come to earth.

Because he was, we also see from these episodes that he cares and provides for us.

- To use John’s language, he is “the bread of life” (John 6.35). He shows God’s maintenance of his creation and his provision for our needs, starting with the most basic.

- He is there when we face life's storms, handling whatever demons (including their prince—see Mark 3.22; 1 Pet 5.8-10) we may be facing. He knows. He cares. He loves. He protects.
- But, do not miss this: his provision goes beyond what we so often focus on and pray about. Look again at Mark 6.34. We tend to tell and read the story like this: Jesus had compassion on them and fed them. Mark will say it that way when he tells how Jesus fed the 4,000 (Mark 8.2; cf. Matt 14.14; 15.32), but our text says “and he had compassion on them, . . . and he began to teach them.” That is what we would expect of the shepherd promised in Ezekiel. Jesus gives the instruction we need to navigate life.

Ultimately, the disciples should have begun to understand that Jesus was God's promised King (cf. Mark 1.15; 8.29—Χριστός, *Christos*). He was dwelling among his people and establishing God's promised reign. He was inviting disciples to submit to that reign. He wanted them to do more than treat him like some sort of medical genie (6.53-56). They were to see him as God reigning, and trust him with their lives.

Our world is different from theirs, but his hope for us remains the same. Do we really see him in the miracles? Or are we just amazed and hope he will somehow make the course we chart a little easier? Eventually, they got it. “You are the Christ,” they said (8:29), and then committed themselves completely to him. What do you say? What will you do?

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Notes

¹ For a response to this presumption and insight into how much ancients did know about the workings of the world, see C. S. Lewis's essays, “Miracles” and “Religion and Science” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 25-37, 72-75.

² The Wikipedia article, “Jefferson Bible,” begins: “*The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, commonly referred to as the *Jefferson Bible*, is one of two religious works constructed by Thomas Jefferson. The first, *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, was completed in 1804, but no copies exist today. The second, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, was completed in 1820 by cutting and pasting with a razor and glue numerous sections from the New Testament as extractions of the doctrine of Jesus. Jefferson's condensed composition excludes all miracles by Jesus and most mentions of the supernatural, including sections of the four gospels that contain the Resurrection and most other miracles, and passages that portray Jesus as divine.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Bible (accessed Jan. 27, 2022). Jefferson's work is available for purchase in book form and can be read online. See for example, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080929061224/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Jeffesu.html> (accessed Jan. 27, 2022).

³ See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), 137, who cites these examples after stating, “Miracles are an intricate part of the record which would become meaningless without the miracle.”

⁴ The word for “wonder” is τέρας (*teras*). Outside the gospels it appears in Acts 2.19, 22, 43; 4.30; 5.12; 6.8; 7.36; 14.3; 15.12; Rom 15.19; 2 Cor 12.12; 2 Thess 2.9; and Heb. 2.4. Note that, in 2 Thess 2:9, “power,” “signs,” and “wonders” are used of the “activity of Satan.”

⁵ A denarius was the typical wage for a day laborer. What would be comparable now would be the earnings of a minimum wage worker. As this is written, the United States federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. Working an eight-hour day at that rate, one would earn \$58.00; multiplied by 200 (about eight months), the total is \$11,600.00. <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/wages/minimumwage> (accessed Jan. 25, 2022).

⁶ Note that, in Mark 8.14-21, after he fed the 4,000, Jesus warned his disciples about “the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (v. 15) and directly connected that warning to both of the feeding miracles (vv. 19-21).

⁷ This may be another OT echo or perhaps two echoes. Different texts describe God treading upon the waves of the sea, exercising his control over nature (see Job 9.8; Psalms 77.19). See Han's Bayer's note in the *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1906; and Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1983, 1989), 103. The language of “passing by” may be reminiscent of when God “passed by” to give Moses a glimpse of his glory (Exod 33.17-23). For discussion of different views regarding the “passed by” reference (v. 48), see Mark L. Strauss and Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 794-795.