



# JESUS AND MIRACLES

by Fleur Dorrell



**In the Hebrew Scriptures, miracles were seen as special signs of God's presence and divine power rather than as contradictions to nature or the known world. They showed that one day God would restore peace in Israel and around the world.**

In the Gospels, the 37 key miracles of Jesus are understood as messianic signs of God's kingdom. These signs or wonders, such as the healing of a person or control over nature, could only be attributed to divine power. The question wasn't so much whether the miracle had really happened, but what it tells us of God's purposes for us and how it affects the life and faith of the one being healed.

Each miracle Jesus performs speaks to a serious human and spiritual need. It always includes a key message about Jesus' identity and authority from God.

Jesus performed many miracles among both Jews and Gentiles, men, women, rich and poor. He cured a variety of physical conditions such as Simon Peter's mother-in-law's fever (Mark 1:30); a paralysed man (Mark 2:3); a blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22); a man's speech and hearing impediments (Mark 7:32) as well as skin complaints with a leper (Mark 1:40) and gynaecological issues for the woman with the haemorrhage (Mark 5:22). The gospel writers reported these miracles as distinct from exorcisms where the healing of the person required the expulsion of evil spirits such as with the two Gadarene men (Matthew 8:28-34).

While we now have more medical knowledge to explain how some suffering and illness is caused and cured, this doesn't undermine or contradict Jesus' ability and power from God to restore people to wholeness and health. Rather, the way Jesus represents God's healing desire among us enriches both our healing relationship with God and our growing theological and medical knowledge of healing.

Jesus primarily uses words and touch to enable the healing to take place whether outside, in a person's house or in the synagogue (Mark 1:25, 41; 2:10-11; 5:41). He draws on the faith of the patient, their family or friend (Mark 2:5; 5:36; 9:24) to bring about a cure. Or he acts confidently to respond to need as with an epileptic boy (Matthew 17:14-20) and in cursing a fig tree that had withered (Mark 11:22-24). Even when Jesus was arrested, he heals Malchus' right ear after it had been cut off with a sword (Luke 22:50-51).

The vulnerable and sick, because of the purity laws condemning them as unclean and contagious, were usually on the margins of society. Or worse still, they were totally ostracised from public life and worship like the blind man of Jericho (Mark 10:46). Unless they were healed they were never going to rejoin society and practise their faith before God in community.

At that time illness and disease were believed to be caused by sin, or as a divine punishment, as in the case of the woman bent double for 18 years (Luke 13:10-17; John 9:1-3). So as with the 10 lepers, once healed, it was important to thank God (Luke 17:11-19). Healing and forgiveness were often seen as linked (Mark 2:1-12).

Miracles such as feeding of crowds of 4,000 and 5,000 appear in the Gospels. Sometimes the emphasis is on Jesus' ability to provide food for all as a sign of the messianic kingdom to come (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-38; Mark 6:35-44; 8:1-9). Other accounts focus more on the crowds (Luke 9:12-17; John 6:5-13). Jesus models the sharing that is a sign of the kingdom of God. He starts with the bread and the fish and then the crowds begin to share whatever they have brought out to the desert and there is enough for all. Part of the miracle is helping the people to move from individual self-concern to a new shared sense of solidarity. The crowds would have remembered the story of God feeding the Israelites as Moses led them to freedom (Exodus 16).

This miraculous food links God's desire for human liberation with Jesus' own ministry. It prefigures Jesus' self-sacrifice which John will speak of in his image of Jesus as the 'Bread of Life' and in his teaching on the Eucharist (John 6:25-59).

Other miracles show Jesus' ability to control the powers of nature, calming the storm and walking on choppy waters (Mark 4:35-41; 6:45-52). This reassured the disciples but also helped them to begin to understand him as the Lord of Creation.

*"Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."*

**John 21:25**

Jesus saves a wedding in Cana from disaster by changing water into high quality wine for the guests (John 2:1-11). He takes great care with different types of suffering such as when he heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 1:30-31 and Luke 4:38-39) or restores to life the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-15) and Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9:18-25; Mark 5:22-42 and Luke 8:41-56).

Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44) has to be one of the most moving miracles of all since Jesus weeps at his friend's death before he commands him to live once more. It is often interpreted as a symbolic foretelling of Jesus' own death and resurrection. But it is the faith of Lazarus' sisters - Mary of Bethany and Martha - that provokes Jesus to act. This blending of family grief and the divine gift of life makes this all the more poignant. And no-one could ever forget it.

In the New Testament three Greek words are used to describe miracles:

- **POWER** (*dunamis*), which means "mighty deed." Jesus' miracles are powerful acts that reveal his omnipotence and divine authority. Later this power, which dwelt within and came forth from Jesus, will be identified as the Holy Spirit who after Jesus' resurrection is poured out on all believers.
- **SIGN** (*sēmeion*), which refers to a miracle that represents something else, such as the kingdom of God. The miracles of Jesus are signs validating his ministry and revealing him to be the Messiah and Son of God.
- **WONDER** (*teras*), which describes their extraordinary nature. Jesus' miracles are wonderful, surprising, compelling, supernatural acts that cause people to marvel at and confirm his divine nature.

